



The Future of Sales Training

Part III of a III part series:

The Sales Training Program of The Future

Article at a glance: Based on more than twenty years of experience in training global sales organizations and multiple independent research sources, Sales Performance International has defined a set of core principles for an ideal learning program for sales organizations. These principles specifically address the major barriers to successful sales training and provide a new path for the sales training program of the future.

The Sales Training Program of the Future

Part III of a III part series...

Continual Learning Program Principles

In the prior two installments of this series, we explored some of the major reasons that traditional approaches to training salespeople fail to deliver a suitable return on investment, and how sales training has evolved across the past three decades. In addition, we explored four distinct types of learning that, if thoughtfully combined, can provide an effective, ongoing development approach for sales professionals. Based on more than twenty years of experience in training global sales organizations and multiple independent research sources, we have defined a set of core principles for an ideal learning program for sales organizations. These principles specifically address the major barriers to successful sales training:

- 1. Sales Process Alignment** – Without a thorough understanding of the sales process (or processes) that enables your salespeople to align with buyers and close business, it is not possible to determine the types of competencies required for successful selling. As a result, most training initiatives omit critical training requirements completely. In addition, a sales process map also provides insight into sales tools and templates that provide the most impact for successful selling.
- 2. Objective Assessment and Measurement** – Sales organizations need defined models for evaluating the knowledge and skills of sales professionals and managers. Without objective assessment and measurement, it is impossible to determine where gaps exist and how training investments impact the skills and abilities of the sales organization.
- 3. Realistic Training Plans** – Training plans need to be layered over time, from basic concepts to more complex topics. Attempting to force too much learning content into a compressed timeframe is unrealistic, and yields little performance improvement. Role-based curriculum plans should lay out realistic, staged learning and reinforcement paths for salespeople and managers.
- 4. Comprehensive Curriculum** – Many sales training initiatives focus on a single aspect of selling, such as opportunity management, and do not address many important competencies (e.g., targeting, account planning, accessing power, etc.) The “learning library” needs to comprehensively span sales planning, execution, and management disciplines. As salespeople acquire core selling competencies, they should progressively have access to curriculum “dial-ups” that lead to mastery in advanced selling skills, such as negotiation, selling to executives, value selling, etc.

5. **A Two-Tiered Reinforcement Model** – Reinforcement needs to be both scheduled and on-demand. Many organizations provide on-demand learning and reinforcement assets that receive limited usage, because salespeople and their managers are preoccupied with daily activity. Like other learners, salespeople need structured reinforcement that is aligned with their learning path, and “pushed” to the salesperson on a planned basis. On-demand assets provide a second tier of reinforcement that provide highly personalized access to content on an individual basis.
6. **Repetition and Variety** – Essential concepts need to be learned and reinforced in multiple forms across planned time horizons. Learning theory supports an ongoing learning experience that utilize multiple modalities. These forms of content delivery should both support the learning objective and offer variety to retain the interest of the learner. An effective program combines many forms of learning and reinforcement delivery, including instructor-led training, eLearning, virtual classrooms, “pushed” content, video sales scenarios, webcast “refresher” lessons, searchable knowledge repositories, and access to forums and discussions.
7. **Scalable “Electronic Reinforcement System” (ERS)** – Access to learning assets, essential how-to’s, and sales tools need to be instantly accessible to salespeople in multiple forms. Salespeople should be able to quickly locate and access learning content through a number of logical pathways. These pathways can include a sales process map that links to learning content, a searchable knowledge base, an indexed set of sales tools, direct linkage through CRM “playbooks,” etc. When designed appropriately, these integrated assets comprise an “Electronic Reinforcement System” (ERS) that supports scalable reinforcement and self-coaching.
8. **Unlimited Learning Access** – The historical pricing model for sales training has been typically a cost “per-person, per-class.” As a result, many aspects of useful intellectual property and methodology are not made available to the entire organization because of cost considerations. The consequences of this approach are that many useful areas of sales methodology are never addressed at any point in training initiatives. In our view, the program of the future provides open access to all methodological content, allowing teams and individuals to pursue unlimited learning opportunities.
9. **On-the-Job Integration** – CRM is used by a majority of sales organizations to organize and track opportunity related information. The “last mile” of learning and reinforcement can be accomplished by integrating essential how-to’s and learning assets directly into CRM usage. These “playbooks” reinforce best practices and can also link to context-based learning resources that are focused on the actual task being undertaken.
10. **Ongoing Program Management** – Sales training programs need to be managed as a business investment. Quarterly business reviews (QBR’s) that measure both learning and business metrics should be mandatory in any sales development program.

The Anatomy of a Continual Learning Program

With these principles of an ideal sales training program in mind, what does such a program actually look like? We believe that a continual learning program consists of several critical components, as follows...

First, before launching any actual training, a “**Program Planning and Configuration**” phase typically is required to ensure that sales goals and objectives are understood, and that the overall training plan is aligned with organizational roles and competency levels. Program planning and configuration would typically include the following activities:

- **Sales Process Design/Validation** – A Sales Process Map will reflect your typical customers’ preferred buying process, and enable the definition of aligned sales steps, with sales activities, verifiable outcomes and milestones/yield percentages defined for each step. The Sales Process Map may include definitions of sales roles, responsibilities, sales tools and technology to be employed per step.
- **Role-Based Curriculum Plans** – Recommended learning plans for specific roles (sellers and sales managers) should be defined with a prescribed learning and reinforcement schedule/timeline. It is important to note that these curriculum plans may address as many as 7-10 broad competency areas and span 18-36 months. These should cover both foundation materials as well as advanced topics that are relevant to the sales position (e.g., territory sales rep, channel sales manager, major account sales executive, first-line sales manager).
- **Sales Tool Tailoring** – Methodology specific sales tools can be extremely valuable for both learning and consistent application of new selling techniques. It is important to identify and populate these tools and templates prior to training. The tools provide both a relevant context for training, as well as excellent reference material after training.

The planning and configuration phase lays the groundwork for a well designed continual learning program. The diagram on the next page (Figure 1) illustrates an example of a six month window for such a program. The top half of the diagram depicts a scheduled sequence of planned activities for a salesperson, and the lower half illustrates on-demand resources that complement the individual’s learning path.

Next, a sales continual learning program will provide scheduled learning and reinforcement. Scheduled training and learning events provide an impetus and a momentum to any sales development program, and is a key component to driving results. These scheduled learning and reinforcement components include:

- **Pre and Post-Training Assessments** – These assessments should test respondents’ likely compliance with best practices described in each training course within their defined role-based learning plan. In addition to measuring the degree of skill improvement, these online assessments help to determine areas of focus for individual reinforcement activities.
- **Scheduled Training** – Based on the learning plan, training content should be assigned at specified intervals. This training can take the form of instructor-led training and/or eLearning, or even a virtual classroom with eLearning as a pre-requisite. Regardless of modality, the key to success is to avoid overwhelming learners with more content than they can assimilate and retain, especially if your organization is making a major shift in its selling approach.

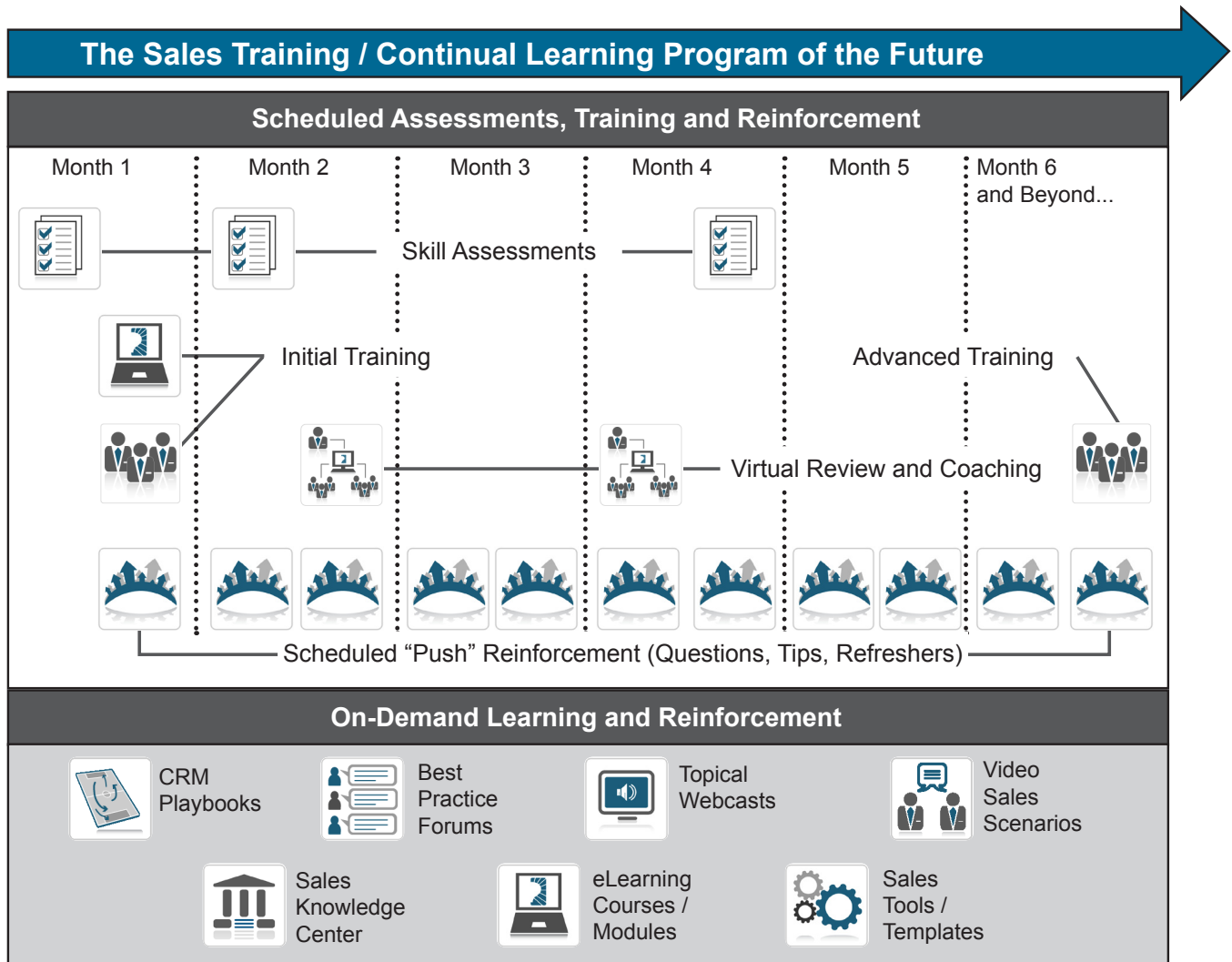


Figure 1

- **“Push” Reinforcement** – a series of ongoing “push” questions, tips, and other information to salespeople and managers to stimulate thinking on the application of corresponding courseware concepts, skills and tools. This content may vary based on roles, and the duration of the pushed reinforcement is usually for 3-4 months following a scheduled training event.
- **Virtual Review and Coaching Sessions** – At least two to three times a quarter, it is extremely valuable to assemble selling teams and review their actual experiences in applying new methods. These sessions should be designed around sales issues and best practices surrounding application of concepts learned during training.

In addition to scheduled learning and reinforcement, a comprehensive learning program will incorporate an extensive array of on-demand learning and reinforcement resources that all align with scheduled learning activities. Managers can also direct their team or individuals to specific learning and reinforcement content they consider relevant to emphasize. These on-demand resources should include:

- **An eLearning Library** – Comprehensive, self-paced training courses in all competency areas – these modules can be used as part of a scheduled plan, or as post-training reinforcement.
- **A “Sales Knowledge Center”** – Standard, searchable content encyclopedia covering essential planning, sales and management how-to’s, as well as sales tools and templates.
- **Discussion Forums** – Well organized discussion forums can provide an effective way for geographically dispersed sales people to discuss challenges and best practices.
- **Topical Webcasts** – Recorded webcasts (10-20 minutes each) can provide a quick “refresher” on key concepts for common selling, planning and management topics.
- **Video Scenarios** – Videos that demonstrate best practices (and bad practices) in common selling situations and engage the user by providing thought-provoking questions.
- **CRM Playbooks** – These playbooks can be imbedded directly within mainstream CRM systems, and they provide context-based help with sales tools, techniques, and learning resources right in the context of working a sales opportunity.

Any sales development program represents a significant change to organizational behavior upon which future success of the enterprise depends. Therefore, dedicated program management and administration is a key part of the success of any sales continual learning program. Assigned program managers should monitor, inspect and report progress of the program, identify barriers to success and help to overcome them, and finally, measure business results.

Benefits of a Continual Learning Approach

A continual learning program approach to sales team development may seem very broad and comprehensive. Is it worth the time and effort required to make it work successfully? There are numerous benefits to applying a continual learning and reinforcement approach, including but not limited to the following:

Improved Retention and Application – By maximizing the relevance of the content to be learned in role-specific, highly tailored content, and by matching the delivery of that content to the way that adult sales professionals actually learn, a continual learning program greatly improves the retention and use of those best practices. Traditional sales training diminishes very quickly. Our research shows that only 16% of unreinforced training event content is retained after 90 days, on average. A continual learning approach raises that retention and adoption rate to more than 90%, producing much broader and more consistent application of effective sales practices, which in turn, results in much better sales results. In short,

a continual learning program enables your sales team to become a true competitive differentiator – one that sets your organization apart, not only by what they sell, but also by how they engage with your customers.

Optimization of Time and Expense – A continual learning program establishes role-based curriculum for each person in your sales organization. As a result, no one will waste any time or money in training on content that is not highly relevant to their success. Further, a continual learning program enables more predictable costs, by providing a fully realized approach that can be licensed and subscribed to over time, for the entire organization.

Reduced Dependency on Human Factors – The weakest link in any sales training project is the first-line sales manager. They must not only develop proficiency in the methods, processes and skills being trained, but must also inspect and coach the development of those new competencies. This is a heavy burden to bear, and most sales managers do an inadequate job supporting new sales practices, no matter how much they try to do so. A continual learning program relieves sales managers of much of the load, as the program's scheduled and on-demand reinforcement components reveal what aspects of sales training need to be coached and developed – making their job much easier, and the program much more successful.

Unlimited Learning Experience – All people learn in different ways at different times. A continual learning approach recognizes this fundamental aspect of human beings, and provides unlimited

access to content required for their success in a variety of media, modalities, and methods. This mix of effective content availability supports improved mastery and development of essential sales skills – which ultimately translates into improved sales results.

Tracks Learning and Business Outcomes – A continual learning approach is a business investment, built first and foremost on how your salespeople can best align with your customers, and how to close more business. Built into a continual learning program is formal measurement of key success metrics – before, during, and after exposure to improved selling practices. These metrics include both measurement of learning and retention, as well as key business metrics such as quota attainment, win rates, and other revenue and profitability goals.

Conclusion

When considering a sales training initiative, companies have a clear choice to make. Will you continue to invest in event-based, flavor-of-the month training – or will you make a legitimate commitment to a continual learning strategy – one that may span multiple years and become ingrained in corporate process and culture. Industry research clearly indicates that “best-in-class” companies (in sales performance) employ many of the continual learning ideas discussed in this paper, although they are not always implemented in a formal, programmatic manner. The challenge is moving from a collection of good ideas to tangible action, and translating these best practices into a formal program for learning and development. Sales Performance International's two decades in the sales training space have led us to such an approach, and we believe the selling challenges of the next decade will demand nothing less for sales excellence.

About the Authors

Robert Kear, Chief Marketing Officer and Partner of Sales Performance International, has led the evolution of the SPI brand from a training firm to an acknowledged leader in helping companies successfully transition from products to solutions. In 2006, Kear teamed with SPI CEO and Founder, Keith Eades, in the co-authorship of *The Solution-Centric Organization* (McGraw-Hill, 2006). Before joining SPI, Kear was vice president of Marketing Strategy and CRM Strategy for JD Edwards & Company. Additionally, Kear was co-founder and chief strategy officer of YOUcentric, an enterprise customer relationship management (CRM) software company. Kear's formative experience also includes technology and management positions at Broadway & Seymour, ITT Telecom and Wrangler. He holds advanced and undergraduate degrees in mathematics from East Carolina University.

Tim Sullivan, Director of Business Development at SPI, brings over 25 years of sales, marketing, and management consulting experience to his role. Before joining SPI, Sullivan held senior roles at Siebel Systems, OnTarget, and Culpepper & Associates. Tim is a frequent public speaker and published author on advanced sales and marketing practices, including co-authorship of the *Solution Selling® Fieldbook* (McGraw-Hill, 2005). Sullivan received a degree in Business Administration from the University of Notre Dame.

James Touchstone, Director Learning Programs, has over 15 years of expertise in the design, development and deployment of a wide range of sales and management related courseware and services. Touchstone oversees management of the *Solution Selling® Suite* of intellectual property and has been instrumental in developing and updating that content across multiple delivery modalities including eLearning, virtual training and supporting technologies. Touchstone is currently leading the effort to develop SPI's Continual Learning Program offering. In 2005, Touchstone teamed with Eades and Sullivan, in the co-authorship of *The Solution Selling® Fieldbook* (McCraw-Hill, 2005). He holds an undergraduate degree in English from UNC Charlotte.

About Sales Performance International (SPI):

Sales Performance International (SPI) is a global sales performance improvement firm dedicated to helping the world's leading corporations elevate their sales relationships and drive measurable, sustainable revenue growth and operational sales performance improvement.

Founded in 1988, SPI has been the leader in helping global companies successfully transition from selling

products to marketing and selling high-value solutions. With extensive sales performance expertise, deep industry knowledge, global resources and a proven track record, SPI collaborates with clients to deliver strategic, operational and tactical solutions.

SPI has assisted more than 900,000 sales and management professionals in more than 50 countries and 14 languages achieve higher levels of performance.



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