



Creating Better Salespeople

Try this quick & easy training exercise

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When should you stop training your salespeople? If you answered “never,” you got the right answer. Training never stops. Effective training for your salespeople should cover your products, your services and sales technique, and it should be ongoing. In fact, I recommend that you do at least a small training exercise at each weekly sales meeting. And you *are* doing weekly sales meetings, aren’t you?

That means that 52 times per year, your salespeople get some level of new knowledge and professional development. Since “inadequate training” is cited as the reason that salespeople change jobs about 70% of the time, good training retains salespeople. I think the reason sales managers do not do much training is that the task seems daunting — to come up with new topics every week is seen as a significant demand on the manager’s time. But it does not have to be.

Here is an exercise I have always found to be effective — and it is simple. For a given unit of time (say, eight to 10 weeks at a time), each salesperson must come into the meeting with a new question he (or she) has created. This question should be one that customers and/or prospects can be asked on every sales call. Notice that I said “new” question. The point of this exercise is to get your salespeople to think about selling, and to think about new ways to get knowledge about your customers that could benefit them in making more sales and building better relationships.

In my opinion, about 80% of a salesperson’s chance to win or lose a sale is determined by the questions he asks. So if he is asking more and better questions than his competitors, he gives himself a big edge on outselling his competition. Challenging your salespeople to be the ones to come up with new questions also involves them and engages them in their own training.

Here is how this works. On week one, tell them that for the next (number of) weeks, their focus is going to be on becoming better questioners. In fact, they are going to become the best questioners in your market. Tell them to take five minutes and come up with one potentially great question that they have never asked a customer. After five minutes, have each salesperson present his question to the group. He should explain why he thinks it is a good question and what he thinks he will accomplish by asking it.

During this time, you should instruct your team to suspend judgment on the questions — this is a criticism-free zone to try things out. Once everyone has presented their questions, then everyone on the team must ask each question on sales calls the



following week at least once (and preferably more) and then report back at the following sales meeting about how well the questions worked. Then take a vote. The good questions become part of your boilerplate questioning structure (again, you do have one of those, right?) and the ineffective ones get discarded. Repeat the exercise, except this time, each salesperson should already have a new question when he arrives at the meeting.

Do this for at least eight weeks and your team’s effectiveness at questioning and discovery will go up significantly. How significantly depends on your team members’ openness to new knowledge and their creativity in creating questions. You can also take a vote each week on which question worked the best and whoever came up with it gets some sort of a prize — a restaurant gift card, perhaps.

There are a few things to remember about this program to make it a success:

- First, no matter how badly you want to, do not supply your own questions or criticize theirs before your team members put them into real-life action. For this program to succeed, they (not you) have to be the stars of the show and they have to be the ones who are taking the risks. If you supply your own questions, then it is just the boss ramming things down their throats. Besides, given room to work, you will be amazed at the quality of questions they come up with. As my friend and fellow trainer Ed Tate likes to say: “Often, the answers are already in the room.” This is one of those times.

■ Second, make sure the emphasis is on *new* question creation, not a regurgitation of what is already being done. As soon as a salesperson says, “Here’s one I like to ask,” thank him for the contribution but tell him that you want him to dig into his head and come up with something new. Your salespeople are smart; this respects their intelligence and creativity.

■ Third, you should be doing ride-alongs as the program progresses to see that the new questions are really being asked in live sales calls. This program only works if it is being put into action and not just discussed in meetings. The whole idea is to improve your salespeople’s selling skills, not their meeting skills. So, as they say, “inspect what you expect.”

■ Fourth, be prepared to discard some questions that your salespeople used to ask in favor of newer and better ones. In fact, this might be a topic for weeks six through eight. “Since we have these new and more effective questions, which ones can — or should — we jettison?”

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If you do this, by the end of eight weeks, your team members’ questioning skills will have gone up exponentially, which means their sales will go up. You should repeat this exercise at least once per year to continually refine the questions and skills. Besides, market conditions may dictate that questions get modified or discarded over time.

In my next article, I will discuss a simple exercise you can do to make your salespeople more effective, on-the-spot presenters. ■

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