3 Techniques to Make Your Sales Training More Effective

By Mike Brooks

According to CEOInsights.com, over 48 percent of inside-sales companies surveyed reported that they missed their monthly revenues goals more times in a 12-month cycle than they reached them. Other sales indicators—such as time on the phone, closing ratios, percentage to monthly goal, and pipeline accuracy—inevitably suffered as well, as sales teams struggled to make quota and reach revenue.

In addition to missing revenue numbers, many other companies indicated that the level of training, core selling skills, and overall selling talent of their sales team could be improved as well. When asked how many companies have a defined sales process in place and a specific training program active to reinforce and teach those best practices, our experience tells us that less than 35 percent of companies have taken the time to define and implement these processes.

You would expect an undertrained sales team to lead to underperformance. Rarely considered, though, is the toll that undertraining takes on other factors. contributing to sales decline. Daily rejection and repeatedly missed sales lead to a lack of confidence, which in turn leads to call reluctance. Getting beaten up for missing quotas leads to poor attitudes—and these attitudes spread rapidly throughout a sales organization, creating an environment that becomes toxic and self-perpetuating.

IS SALES TRAINING ENOUGH?

All companies have some form of sales training, even if it just consists of new reps shadowing senior reps for a few days before they "hit the phones." While sales training can be graded from inefficient to very effective, there are some important points you should consider when designing your own sales training:

❶ Don't just make your overall training specific to your product or service; also break your training down into the various parts of your sales cycle and teach best practices for each part. For example, if your first call is simply intended to set an appointment or send information to a prospect, what five benchmarks do your reps need to cover for you to consider this a qualified lead?

Having this kind of clarity all the way through your sales cycle will not only help your reps but also assist your manager in coaching them throughout the sale.

❷ Give your reps specific, scripted responses to the sales situations they run into every day. This is the best way to empower your reps—and it helps them successfully navigate the sale from beginning (getting through the gatekeeper) to end (getting the deal in the door).

An example would be to script out and teach them how to overcome the smokescreen objection "I have to show this to my boss." Most sales reps don't know how to deal with this objection, so their usual response is something along the lines of, "OK, when should I get back with you?"

This approach creates nonqualified leads that clog up pipelines.

A specific, scripted approach to this objection will teach your reps to isolate the objection and examine whether it's a smokescreen or a real objection. Have them use an approach like this: "I understand, and I think you should speak to _________. Just out of curiosity, if they say to do whatever you think is best, where are you leaning in regard to using this?"

Again, giving your reps specific tools with which to navigate through the sale will help them succeed.

3 Make sales training a daily event. To learn a new skill of any kind, you need to reinforce it daily. We recommend running a brief sales meeting every morning to reinforce the skills and techniques that your top 20 percent are using successfully. Playing recordings, role playing, and passing out updated scripts will help your team improve on a daily and weekly basis.

"Each 'no' gets you closer to a 'yes.' Embrace hearing 'no.' It usually means you're that much closer to getting the sale."

SPECIFIC SALES SOLUTIONS

In alignment with the previous suggestions, here are three specific sales solutions that you can adapt and implement to immediately make your inside sales team more effective. These proven skills will help your team navigate past some of the common objections, brush-offs, and problematic situations they encounter on a daily basis. You can use these techniques as sales-meeting topics and have your team customize them to fit their selling situations.

QUALIFYING TECHNIQUES

Question the Red Flags

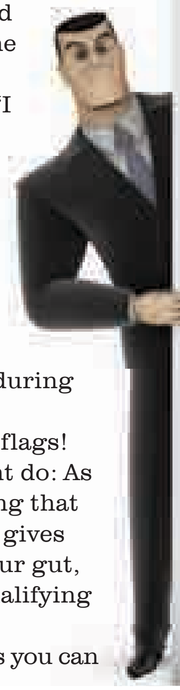
One of the best ways to determine who actually *does* make it into your sales pipeline is to make sure you avoid one of the biggest mistakes that 80 percent of salespeople make when qualifying: overlooking or not reacting to obvious red flags that prospects wave during the initial qualifying call.

In their haste or desperation to "generate a lead" or "fill their pipeline," many sales reps hope that any objection they hear on the front end will miraculously go away once the prospect sees their information, product, or service.

But, as you know from your own experience, it never does.

In fact, the rule for calling back leads is as follows: Leads Never Get Better!

What appears to be an objection or deal killer on the front end, always is.



Teach Your Reps How to Avoid Being Brushed Off

So often prospects aren't really interested, but they either don't know how to say so or won't come out and tell us. Instead, they will say things like "Go ahead and send me the (information, brochure, demo), and I'll take a look," or "Put that quote in writing and send it to me."

When a top closer hears this, his or her first thought is, "I don't have the time to do that, and I especially don't have the time to follow up with an unqualified lead." Here's how top closers handle it—and how your reps should, too:

Put-off #1: "Go ahead and send me your information."
Your response: "I'd be happy to, and if you like what you see, is this something you would move on in the next couple of weeks?"
OR
"Before I do, I want to make sure you'd be ready to act on it if you like it. Let me ask you..." (qualifying questions on budget, decision-making process, etc. should be asked next)
OR
"Sure! And after you review it, how soon would you make a decision on it?"
OR
"And what would you need to see to say yes to it?"

Put-off #2: "Put that quote in writing and send it to me."
Your response: "I'd be happy to, and from what we've just discussed, does it sound like you'd go with it?"
OR
"Absolutely. How does this compare with the other quotes you've received so far?"
OR
"Great. Based on the quote/price I just gave you, does this sound like it fits within your budget?"

A sales rep told me about a prospect who wasn't calling him back, and who (once he did reach him) told him that he was leaving the company. He wrote to me and said, "I guess intuitively I knew he wasn't the right guy to make the decision anyway."

And I'll bet he intuitively knew this because he heard (but didn't question) the red flags the prospect raised during the qualification call.

Don't ignore these red flags! Do what the top 20 percent do: As soon as you hear something that triggers your intuition or gives you that sick feeling in your gut, stop and ask the tough qualifying questions!

Here are some examples you can begin using today:

If someone says that they usually buy from XYZ but would like to see your information, ask:

"Why would you switch vendors?" or "How many other companies have you looked at in the last six months?"

And then: "And how many did you go with?"

If someone says that they will pass your information on to So and So, say:

"Thanks. So that I make sure I'm not wasting her time, it's best that I speak with her for just a few minutes. Can you tell her that (your name) is holding, please?" (If you're then told the person is not available, make sure to get a direct line or that person's extension, and keep calling until he or she picks up.)

If someone says that they'd be glad to look your materials over, ask:

"Great; after you do, and if you think that it can help you (or your business, etc.), what would the next steps be?"

And so on.

CLOSING TECHNIQUE: FIVE WAYS TO STOP TALKING PAST THE CLOSE

Have you ever caught your reps doing this? They deliver a great presentation, think that your prospect is with them, but then they just keep on pitching. Or they encounter an objection, answer it, and then just keep pitching—or worse, they go on to the next rebuttal and start reading that pitch.

Talking past the close is far more common than repeatedly asking for the sale (which is what they should be doing). That's because it's scary to ask for the deal and be told "no." It's easier to keep pitching: "Maybe they'll just cave and finally hear something they want and buy."

Sound familiar? It should. That's how 80 percent of your sales reps are pitching. They are ad libbing, talking past the close, and even introducing new objections. What a mess!

Here are five ways to stop talking past the close, so your reps can spend more time closing and earning the income the top 20 percent do:

❶ *Record yourself.* Before you can stop talking past the close, you first must begin hearing and catching yourself doing it. One day of recording your reps, and you'll become immediately aware of when and how they do it.

❷ *Use a script.* One of the best parts of a well-crafted script is that it ends with your reps asking for the deal! Listen to their recordings and then craft a good response to the common objections they are getting. Then, make sure they actually adhere to the script.

❸ *Ask for the deal five times.* If you give your reps a close quota of asking for the deal at least five times, they are going to be much quicker in asking for it.

Have them keep track of their figures on a piece of paper using tally strokes. If 20 minutes have gone by and no marks are on the paper, you know your team is in trouble!

❹ *Welcome hearing "no."* So many sales reps are afraid of rejection, but there's no reason to be. With most sales you've made, you've probably heard some refusals along the way, so reframe the way your team thinks about them and realize the truth: Each "no" gets you closer to a "yes." Embrace hearing "no." It usually means you're that much closer to getting the sale.

❺ *Shut up and listen.* Teach your team to be quiet after they ask for the sale. They should use their mute button or cover the mouthpiece, and then count to five. By forcing your reps to remain silent for five seconds after asking for the sale, they'll actually have something to concentrate on besides fear.

If your sales team is in the 50 percent of teams that aren't making their monthly sales quotas regularly, then daily, specific sales training is your fastest way to change that reality. Other factors are in play as well, including having a defined sales process, an organized sales training program that reinforces your best practices, and so on. But using and reinforcing the techniques will bring you and your team immediate results. N

Mike Brooks is president of Mr. Inside Sales, an inside sales training and consulting firm. Mike has been voted one of the Most Influential Inside Sales Professionals four years in a row by The American Association of Inside Sales Professionals. For more information, visit his website: www.MrInsideSales.com.