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C.39 Training of Salespeople

THE ROLE OF TRAINING IN SALES FORCE PERFORMANCE

Sales training cannot turn an unqualified salesperson into a qualified one nor can it overcome a badly organized or poorly motivated sales organization. However, it can improve a qualified salesperson and it can complement a well-managed sales organization.

The Objectives of Sales Training. A model developed by Walker, Churchill, and Ford identifies five factors that lead to a salesper-

son's being productive.¹ They are (1) understanding their role, (2) being motivated, (3) having the requisite aptitude for selling, (4) having adequate selling skills, and (5) being in a supportive organization and environment (see GLOSSARY entry C.31).

Although sales training can be used by a firm to clarify its expectations of the role that salespeople will fulfill, its primary objec-

¹Orville C. Walker, Jr., Gilbert A. Churchill, Jr., and Neil M. Ford, "Motivation and Performance in Industrial Selling: Present Knowledge and Needed Research," *Journal of Marketing Research* 14 (May 1977), pp. 156-68.

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tive is to build and refine selling skills so that salespeople will be more productive in doing their jobs. If salespeople are productive, they are also likely to be more satisfied in their jobs and, as a result, turnover will be lower.

Sales training also makes salespeople better able to achieve sales objectives and thus better able to earn the motivational rewards offered by the company. The sales training program, therefore, makes the firm's sales motivation program more effective (see GLOSSARY entry C.8). Some sales training programs try to directly influence motivation by scheduling motivational speakers. The effectiveness of this approach is debatable. It is certainly not a substitute for efforts to improve productivity by improving selling skills.

Determining Training Needs. Before a sales training program is developed, training needs should be carefully defined. Training needs can be divided into two classes: (1) training for newly hired salespersons and (2) continuing training for the experienced salesperson.

The training needs of a newly hired salesperson can be determined by examining the position description describing the task and responsibilities to be fulfilled, examining the experience of the new salesperson, and deciding the policies, procedures and products for which the salesperson will be responsible. Generally new salespersons will need both orientation to the company, its products, and its customers and training in the personal selling process.

The training needs of experienced salespeople will center on strengthening weaknesses in selling skills and on communicating changes in products, promotion, and company procedures. Training needs for experienced salespeople will sometimes be revealed through examination of sales statistics for individual salespeople or analysis of call reports filed by salespeople. More often, weaknesses in selling techniques are found by sales managers through field supervision of their sales personnel. Individual weaknesses can be handled by one-on-one coach-

ing, but when a problem is found to be generally present, it becomes a subject for group sales training. In addition, changes in the product line, new promotional programs, and changes in company policies or sales procedures may require training sessions to introduce the changes to the sales force.

DECISIONS IN DEVELOPING SALES TRAINING PROGRAMS

Developing a sales training program requires the manager to make a series of decisions about the content, participants and other issues. The more important of these decisions are considered below.

Who Should Receive Training? Everyone engaged in selling for the firm should receive sales training, but not everyone should attend every training program.

Orientation and sales training should be received by all new sales representatives before they are sent into the field. Ordinarily this training should be separate from the training for experienced sales force members.

Training for experienced salespeople usually focuses on specific problem areas such as effective closing or how to conduct prospecting. Such training should be made available to those diagnosed as having a weakness in that area. More general training, such as on new products or new **sales promotions** (see GLOSSARY entry C.36), should generally have participation from all members of the sales force.

What Should Be the Content of the Training? The content of training programs is determined by the objectives of the program. Training programs should be aimed at correcting specific weaknesses in the selling program.

McMurray suggests that the content areas that should be covered include these:²

²Robert N. McMurry, "The Mystique of Super-Salesmanship," *Harvard Business Review* (March-April 1961), pp. 118-120.

- **Orientation.** Orientation to the company and its history is especially important for new sales representatives. This knowledge is important as the salesperson represents the firm to its customers. Such knowledge also builds the salesperson's self-esteem and helps clarify the role of the salesperson.
- **Product and Service Knowledge.** Thorough knowledge of the company's products and services is essential for salespeople if they are to sell it to knowledgeable customers. For complex, technical products, adequate product training may take months or even years and may involve working inside the firm in production or engineering areas before going into the field. Products requiring that applications be developed or the product tailored to customer needs requires development of extensive product knowledge. Knowledge of competitive products must ordinarily be developed at the same time.
- **Sales Procedures.** Most companies develop detailed procedures that the salesperson must learn and follow. These include processes for writing up and transmitting orders, policies for pricing and discounting, and procedures for postsale services. Salespersons must learn what latitude is permitted in countering competitive offers and what price and product concessions can be offered to customers. (See GLOSSARY entries C.13, 32 on pricing policies.) Salespeople are generally required to file call reports, activity reports, or customer reports. These procedures must be learned.
- **Time Management.** Salespeople spend most of their time in the field, alone and unsupervised. Much of their time is spent waiting or traveling between calls and too little of it with customers. Effective salespeople must learn how to manage their time so that waiting and travel time are minimized and customer contact is maximized.
- **Selling Skills.** Both new and experienced salespeople need training in selling skills. The **personal selling** process provides a guideline to potential areas for training (see GLOSSARY entry C.20). The specific selling skills areas chosen as training topics should be guided by an analysis of sales force performance to pinpoint areas of weakness.

What Training Method Should Be Used?

Training methods vary in the amount of participation permitted the trainee and in the individual attention given to trainees. Train-

ing methods commonly used include lectures, group discussions, role playing, on-the-job training, and coaching.

- **Lecture.** Lectures are a large group training method that offer little or no active participation or individual attention. As a result, they offer the least opportunity for learning, yet they are widely used. Lectures are an economical way of transmitting factual information to trainees, but this method is a weak approach to teaching selling skills.
- **Group Discussion.** In **group discussion**, the trainees take an active role and the trainer plays the role of moderator rather than teacher. Participants are able to explore personal views and problems with their peers. The subject of the discussion may be a problem introduced by the moderator or the discussion may center on a case problem provided by the trainer. Because of the trainees' involvement, group discussions can be a powerful learning technique, but a well-trained discussion leader is required to keep the discussion on track, get participation from all members, and move the discussion toward some conclusions.
- **Role Playing.** Like group discussions, **role playing** is a small group activity that creates learning through active participation and practice. In role playing, selected participants are asked to act out a problem situation, such as trying to close a sale with a reluctant customer, while the rest observe. The group then discusses the skills and behavior of the role players, attempting to develop a better way of solving the problem. After discussion, the situation may be replayed to try new approaches or new situations may be presented for role playing. This technique is most effective in the selling skills area where it allows trying new techniques in a low-risk environment.
- **On-the-Job Training.** Newly hired salespeople, after initial orientation and training, are frequently given on-the-job training. The usual approach is to assign the trainee to a mentor or coach and allow the trainee to work side-by-side with the experienced person, gradually assuming more and more responsibility. The mentor instructs, observes, and corrects the trainee's efforts, gradually building skills and confidence until he or she is ready to work alone. On-the-job training is highly participatory and individualized. If the person playing

the mentor role is well qualified, the method is highly effective.

- **Coaching.** **Coaching** is a term used to refer to the on-the-job training activities of sales managers with experienced salespersons. Customarily sales managers or field sales supervisors will make periodic sales calls with experienced salespersons to observe their selling behavior. After the observation, the manager suggests areas where improvement might be made, perhaps demonstrating alternative techniques. The salesperson is then encouraged to apply the new approach and the sales manager follows up to determine progress and encourage continued effort. Coaching is simply a supervisory method used in developing the skills of experienced salespeople. If the sales manager's suggestions are viewed as knowledgeable and helpful rather than threatening, the method is highly effective.

Where Should Training Take Place? Training can take place either at a central location, usually the home office, or in the field. Most companies use both techniques. For any particular training program, the choice is dependent upon the training method to be used, the facilities required, and the availability of training resources.

Centralized training is appropriate for any of the group training methods such as lectures. Centralization economizes on the time of trainers and may permit the use of experts or specialized personnel who are not available to travel to the field. If conducted at the home office, company meeting facilities can be used and production operations observed. The serious disadvantage of centralized training is that travel and living expenses of trainees become substantial and the time lost from selling can produce additional expense in the form of lost sales.

Decentralized training is necessary for on-the-job training and coaching activities. Group training can also be conducted at several regional field sites. Decentralized training reduces travel and lodging expenses and reduces time away from the job, but increases the cost and time required from home office or outside trainers. Home office meeting and production facilities are not available and meeting with home office personnel will be limited.

Who Should Do the Training? Selection of an effective trainer is essential to success of a training program. The trainer may be an inside manager or an outside consultant. Choice depends upon the subject of the training and the skills available internally.

Selling skills may be taught by the sales manager or, in larger firms, by a sales training director who usually has field selling experience. Such people have credibility and authority based on their position and experience, but they may not be skilled at training. Teaching about the product and conducting company orientation must be done by insiders because only they have the requisite knowledge. On-the-job training and coaching must, of course, be conducted by inside personnel, usually experienced salespersons and sales supervisors.

For some programs, usually those on selling skills, outside training consultants may be used. Some of these have excellent skills and well-constructed programs. The danger is that, because of their unfamiliarity with the particular business, they may lack credibility or their recommendations may be dismissed as not applicable.

How Should the Program Be Evaluated? Sales training programs should undergo formal evaluation. If good objectives have been set, ones that provide specific and measurable standards, actual outcomes can be compared to standards to evaluate program effectiveness. Unfortunately, however, most effectiveness measures are subjective estimates made by supervisors and trainers. Changes in sales performance are difficult to measure, take place only slowly, and are difficult to attribute to particular training programs. Asking participants to complete evaluation forms on completion of training sessions can provide insights that permit program improvement.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

MCMURRY, ROBERT N. "The Mystique of Super-Salesmanship." *Harvard Business Review* (March-April 1961), pp. 113-22.