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# Developing Sales Professionals In Today's Complex Selling Environment

by JEFF THULL



Today's marketplace is characterized by the increasing complexity of the business problems we solve and the solutions we offer that address them. Combine that with a highly competitive market that offers abundant solution options and you'll find that many customers are overwhelmed with choices and are looking for guidance in making quality business decisions. Salespeople are the obvious source for this guidance, and there now may be more people influencing the decision to buy as it moves higher and broader in the organization. Unfortunately, this level of guid-

ance is frequently not forthcoming from salespeople, yet providing it can become a critical source of advantage.

How do you begin to develop and motivate your sales force to operate in this challenging environment when you know you have unique and valuable solutions that are not reaching or connecting to the right people, in the right place and at the right time?

Sales professionals who are capable of guiding their customers through the process of thoroughly understanding the problems they face and developing an optimal solution amongst the available

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alternatives are clearly on the path to sustained profitability.

Designing sales development programs for these times starts with helping the salesperson understand how their role has changed. Their role today is that of a business advisor and a source of competitive advantage. Their required skills are more similar to those of a process analyst or project manager than the historic persuader. The objective of today's sales professional is to create a solution that the customer would have been unable to think of or put together on his or her own. The sales professional looks at the issues beyond the expertise

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The content of today's learning programs must reflect the sales professional's desire to become a trusted business advisor. The program needs to be about business, not about selling. It needs to be about guiding customer decisions, not about presenting volumes of solution information. The content needs to be integrated into the customer's environment. As a guideline, we have found the metaphor of a bridge provides a meaningful template. The bridge provides a roadmap or guide for a diagnostic conversation. It is literally designed to connect the customer's business drivers to the value sources within your solution. It describes a series of relationships that extends significantly beyond the one-to-one nature of the feature/benefit relationship.

The intermediate relationships within the bridge would include:

- The business drivers of a customer are shown to relate to various job responsibilities within the customer's organization.
- Job responsibilities are then connected to physical indicators or symptoms that would suggest the desired performance of the job responsibilities is at risk.
- The symptoms must be associated with the possible causes of

the symptoms, some your solution can address and some your solution may not be able to address.

- The causes are connected to specific consequences that are or may be experienced by the individual and the business.
- And finally, your solution capabilities need to be tied directly to the causes of the problem to be solved, noting how they eliminate those causes. If the cause of the problem is eliminated, so are the consequences of that problem.

The net effect of developing the bridge provides a direct corollary between the absence of your solution and the customers' ability to attain their desired business driver performance. The flow of the bridge content teaches a diagnostic strategy, provides the flow of a diagnostic conversation, and supports the development of the skill to thoroughly diagnose a customer's issues, design an optimal solution and deliver maximum results.

By designing learning programs with the objective of developing today's sales professionals, your programs will connect firmly with the individual's motivation to be accepted as a professional, respected by their customers and colleagues, and successful in accomplishing their goals. Their value to your organization will be clearly defined, and the knowledge and skills they are developing will position them in high

regard with their customer and within your organization.

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### **The Commitment**

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The question asked by many organizations and sales professionals is "What will it take to become successful in this new environment?" First, the learning path should be precise, including specific field applications and the expected time commitment. As you create the development plan, include how they will be supported. How will they be coached, what reference materials are available, and if relevant, would you be able to supply a sample of their expected output when the skill is mastered? With this in place, the learner who knows what they want to accomplish will understand exactly what is required to get there. This allows the learner to make an informed decision to "pay the price and do what it takes."

Very specific application steps should be described as part of the learning process, and coaching guidelines should be built into the design of the program. It should not be an option to participate in the program and not be required to demonstrate the knowledge or skills being taught. I realize this seems like a very basic tenet of program design, but sales training is notorious for being served as a


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smorgasbord of ideas, the “use what you like and set the rest aside” school of training. Imagine the effect of programs such as “Six Sigma” or “Principles of Finance” being offered up as optional components. Built-in application and accountability ensures that the learner understands they are expected to take action and the manager understands they are expected to coach.

Finally, it is imperative to the motivation of the salesperson that you help them recognize the progress they have made. This is dependent on defining measurable and relevant milestones for each learned behavior. The milestones should tie directly to the desired success and be defined in both quantitative and qualitative terms, but more important they must occur early and often during the learning process. If the milestone selected is “increased sales,” it is certainly measurable in both a quantitative and qualitative sense, but waiting too long to recognize that success will no doubt be very de-motivating.

As an example of short-term measurement, let’s consider a module on questioning skills designed to lead to more sales. Assume that part of the skill taught is how to research your customer and craft high-gain questions.

- The first step or measurement of the application of the skill could be to research one company and build a questioning strategy or diagnostic map. Feedback and coaching would follow and



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progress is noted.

- For step 2, the questions are used in a role-play with a colleague. Feedback and coaching follows and more progress is noted.
- In step 3, the questions are used during a customer interview. Quantitative measurement: asked four new questions. Qualitative measurement: uncovered more in-depth information than I ever have before. Logical conclusion: I am uncovering more relevant information, building a closer relationship of customer understanding and I am measurably closer to a successful sale. In this sequence of learning, criteria number four, “recognizing progress,” is accomplished.

The challenges of today’s sales professional have vastly surpassed the level of learning required by historic feature benefit/product training. We are well advised to

develop our learning programs to reflect the characteristics of the programs designed to meet the similar challenges of other professions, such as teaching scientific principles to research scientists, diagnostic principles to physicians, and the coaching of top athletes.

The goal is to develop learning programs that meet the requirements of performance: a system that will guide performance, skills that will enable the individual to execute the system, and the personal discipline to address the emotional inhibitors of performance. With that accomplished, you have successfully delivered a development program that will equip your sales organization with the skills and mindset to successfully bridge the value gap and become a trusted business advisor to your customers.