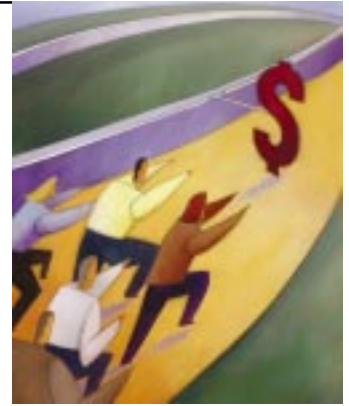


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# Training Program Pays Off Big Time



When Paul Lunsford, CPMR, thinks back to 2001 when he signed on with a sales coach for the reps who make up his sales team, he doesn't bemoan for a moment the time, effort and expense. Rather, he considers where he would be today without that effort.

According to Lunsford, president of AIM/R-member Manufacturers Marketing, Inc., (MMI), Westfield, Indiana, his continued emphasis on rep training serves as just another weapon in the battle to develop a "competitive edge."

"My philosophy, and the philosophy of our agency, is that no one in our organization should ever stop learning," he says. "The catalyst for that philosophy is a simple one. If we're not trying to constantly develop a competitive edge, then we're leaving an easy mark on the ground for our competition. As I consider all the things we encounter in running an agency and in staying competitive, there are many things that affect my business that I cannot control. I could go on for hours about all the uncontrollable things. However, there are some things I can control, and one of them is the education of my team."

To that end, MMI had in place a regular emphasis on keeping its team members up to speed. Years ago he began by training his staff in sales training basics. He made every effort to see to it that they regularly attended seminars on sales and improving communication skills. "We sent them to everything from Zig Ziglar seminars to Colin Powell formal presentations. Some of these were the very large stadium 'rah-rah' kinds of events. We did that for years, but what we came away with was the question: Was it worth it?

We walked out of these sessions feeling good about what we heard, but after just a couple of weeks we all agreed that we couldn't remember what they said to us. And, more importantly, we didn't experience any improvement on the street. Simply stated, the kind of events we were participating in were motivational, enthusiastic kinds of events emphasizing that we had to continue the effort, not quit, stay focused, etc."

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## More Focused Approach

To say it was time for a change is an understatement, and that's exactly what Lunsford and his agency did. "By our very nature our team members persevere and are highly motivated. As a result, we came to the conclusion that attending these sessions was a misdirected effort. Added to that was the expense. Once you add the expense to the time spent out of the territory attending them, there was a marked absence of effect."

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***“We developed a uniform strategy that worked to the benefit of both our customers and us. This experience changed the way we went out to work each day.”***

In addition to that, Lunsford continues his explanation of the agency’s change of course when he describes what began happening in the marketplace. “It’s true throughout the entire rep world that today, as a result of consolidation, there are fewer food suppliers, plumbing manufacturers, distributors, etc. What that has meant is that in the past, even in a very competitive marketplace, the share we brought to our plate was 25 percent–35 percent. That’s a pretty good success rate. I was happy with that. But as a result of consolidation, we’re in contact with fewer customers. So even though we may have that same rate of success, you’re talking about a decrease in business. The 75-percent miss rate was really too much for us to take.

“As the trend continued, I began looking for some course of action that could help us and make a difference for our team. But, whatever we did, I wanted to make sure that the type of training we undertook was not some ‘boilerplate program.’”

In order to carve out a non-boilerplate path, Lunsford explains that two courses of action were followed:

- Executive reads — “The first thing we did was to have what I call executive reads. We’d pick a book that we felt could help us (e.g., *The World Is Flat* by Tom Friedman or *The Good and the Great* by Jim Collins). We’d have our management group read it and then discuss the subject matter all with the goal of developing a single common vision. I was in the hope that by reading books that discussed ‘excellence,’ we would be able to settle on a common definition of what excellence is, and then implement that definition. Our effort didn’t work. I found that in our own little world, each of us interpreted the message differently. As a result, we couldn’t settle on a definition to work with. While that effort didn’t accomplish our goal, we haven’t given up the effort of the executive read. It continues today.”
- Professional sales coach — “Our next effort — and this was the single most defining thing we’ve ever done — was to hire a professional sales coach.

“On September 9, 2001, we signed a contract with a company called Growth Dynamics, a professional sales training company that uses a professional sales coach. This was the most expensive venture I ever undertook for our sales team. However, on September 12, I called them up and cancelled because at the time I figured that was the prudent thing to do. Their representative, who was located in Philadelphia and certainly had the East Coast perspective of the events of 9/11, told he me he understood my decision. He asked me to stay in touch and to let him know if there was anything they could do for us. I did just that and called him back later in the month to sign a new agreement.”

### **Developing a Competitive Advantage**

Lunsford notes that MMI personnel began meeting with the sales coach annually — at considerable expense to the agency. “What this accomplished for us was a basis for acting in a unified manner. We developed a uniform strategy that worked to the benefit of both our customers and us. This experience changed the way we went out to work each day. What we learned has provided us with our current competitive advantage.

“A major difference is that now we work within a culture of understanding each other and our customers. Ultimately what we’ve learned is that not only do we want to work faster and close a higher percentage of orders, we also don’t want to waste time on things that will never close. We’ve been able to provide our sales team with the skill sets to make those things happen.”

All those words sound good, but when it comes to actual measurements, did the effort pay off? “We measured our performance and the answer is that it worked. Prior to undergoing the program of working with the sales coach, we normally grew our business at a rate of approximately 11 percent annually. We increased that mark to 21 percent after undergoing the program. It paid for itself in spades. It’s worked so well for us that I won’t quit. I liken the experience a little bit to what Tiger Woods does with his golf swing. He’s got a golf swing coach that he works with regularly — just as we work with our sales coach. His coach will never be able to beat him in a game of golf. His coach probably isn’t even a ‘scratch golfer.’ But without that coach, Tiger Woods would never be as effective as he is.”

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### Closing a Major Customer

The 10-percent increase in business growth isn't the only proof Lunsford points to when he explains how effective the sales coaching has been. "Here's another example of its effectiveness. I had been working without success for four years to convert the largest wholesaler in our territory. During our sales training, I completed four sales calls and converted him. There was absolutely no question that I felt more confident when making those calls. I was able to gather from the customer everything I needed to know in order to sell him. That conversion was worth \$180,000 to me."

Lunsford explains that the Growth Dynamics program was very sales specific. At the same time — as the four initials (CPMR) that follow his name at the

beginning of this article indicate — he's also a big believer in reps learning all they can about every aspect of running their businesses. "CPMR remains a very important training program. In addition, I'm also a big advocate of AIM/R and what that association provides for its members. The networking that takes place during the meetings is probably as powerful as any sales training course you could undertake. Knowing who the players are in your industry and learning what they think is priceless."

Lunsford concludes by emphasizing the overall importance of continued training for the rep when he says, "If you don't take the steps to constantly train, then you're going to get killed in the marketplace. My advice to any rep who doesn't believe in that is that I'd like to invite them to come into my territory and compete against me. It won't even be a contest." □

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