

TRAINING

THE HUMAN SIDE OF BUSINESS

PRODUCT TRAINING THAT WORKS

Most product training buries sales reps in specs and data sheets. But it doesn't teach them what they need to know about the product, much less how to sell it.



BY ROGER LISTON

WHEN INTEL INTRODUCED THE 8086 in 1979, the fore runner of the Pentium processor of the Pentium processor, it was the first time the company faced selling a product with a perceived technical disadvantage. Customers considered Motorola's 6800, with its familiar architecture, much easier to program. Intel's win rate against Motorola slid to a humbling 10 percent, and its traditional "beat-them-with-the-specs" sales approach left salespeople writing lost-order reports. What did Intel do? It brought in some specially designed product-sales training. The intense training program was known as Operation Crush. And it worked. In just weeks, Intel's "design-win rate" (the first step in the sales process for high-tech products) went from 10 to 80 percent. Salespeople learned a new formula and used it. I know because I customized the training and delivered it to Intel's sales team.

At Seagate Technology Inc., a Scotts Valley, CA, manufacturer of computer hard drives, I use the same approach to train our distributors' sales reps and train them fast. We have learned how difficult and valuable it is to get a sales team trained quickly on a new product, especially one that is very different from a company's mainstream offerings. Both resellers and distributors understand the importance of being the first to sell new products. They gain a tremendous market advantage and higher margins, while higher-paying customers become easier to create and keep. The companies that are most time-efficient in learning to sell the new technologies have the competitive edge. But getting a sales team trained in new products is a process that few companies understand. They readily schedule the obligatory new-product training programs conducted by vendors, but sales reps are rarely able to sell the new product immediately. Why not? Two reasons: 1) They don't know how to, or 2) they don't want to. The "want to" is about motivation; I'll cover that later. First comes the "how to."

CHURCH-GRADE SLEEP

Most salespeople would like to sell new products, but unfamiliarity creates uncertainty. They don't know where to start-so they don't. A distributor may attempt to remedy this situation by asking the vendor of the new product to provide training. But

salespeople rarely leave vendor-provided training psyched up and ready to sell. In fact, most of them can't even move after a typical session because they've been put to sleep by the trainer. Most research indicates that people learn better when they are awake. Typically, product-training sessions are conducted by the sales reps who sell to resellers or distributors. They are told it is part of their job to train their customers' reps. These "trainers" often pre pare for the task by attending a daylong workshop on how to give presentations. But effective product training is not "I talk, you listen." It is teaching learners to use new information in a selling context. The trainer must assist the salespeople by actually guiding them through specific elements of the sale and showing them how to



conduct each step of the sale..

The next problem is that the information the trainer delivers is written by an "expert"-usually a product designer who has never done any selling. The information focuses more on how the product was designed than on how to sell it. Add to this already confusing mixture the erroneous belief that more information is better, and you have a recipe for hours of wasted time.

Just how ineffective are these sessions? We did an informal survey (when the managers were absent). We asked our customers, the sales reps, to answer the question, "What does vendor-provided training mean to you?" Here are a few responses:

- A towering stack of transparencies.
- Church-grade sleep.
- A product-based yawning fest (PB YF).
- Reading us specifications 'til we're numb. (I can't feel my toes!)
- They didn't bring enough information. We're still moving!

THE RIGHT INFORMATION

The foregoing is a common outline of a training program that is more confusing than enlightening. The scenario is not contrived.

It happens many times every day across the country. But what else can you expect when the wrong information is delivered the wrong way by an unskilled person?

How can you protect your sales force from well-intentioned time wasters? let's start with a simple definition of the selling process: Selling, at the very minimum, consists of the skillful use of the right information.

Armed with the right information and good training, salespeople can sell any new product that is competitive. But what is the right information? If you want to know that, don't ask the product designer, ask the person who has been selling the product.

I have compiled a list of essential product-training topics. Price and delivery are included since these are the bare minimum of any sale. But if all your reps take away from product training is price and delivery, they will use those factors to "buy" orders. Reps who can only "buy the business," lowering the price until it is irresistible to the buyer, are the result of ineffective training. And companies that sell on price face the never-ending challenge of eking out a profit, not to mention staying in business.

Here's what sales reps need to know to sell a product on the basis of value:

- What is the product or line?
- Why do people buy it? (what problems does it solve?)
- How to find the buyers.
- How to qualify the buyers.
- How to select or configure the product.
- How to advocate the product
- How to differentiate the product (its advantages).
- How to remember or find this information in ten seconds or less
- Price.
- Availability.

Notice that the topics on this list are quite different from those found on the typical product data sheet. Reading a data sheet to learners is not enough. Also, notice what is *not included*: company histories, price/earnings ratios, market shares, or photos of where and how the product is built.

Are vendors covering the topics sales reps need to know in your training sessions? Probably not. Suppose, on the

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other hand, that your reps received all this information about a new, high-margin line in a brief one- or two-hour training session. Would they be prepared to sell effectively? Many would say yes. However; even armed with usable information, the typical rep would not feel comfortable selling.

BOOST 'EM UP THE LEARNING CURVE

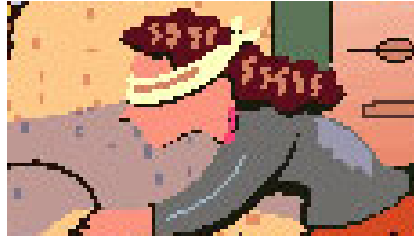
To evaluate vendor-provided product training, ask: Is it the right information? Is it summarized in an easy-to-use sales guide? Does the vendor show your reps how to conduct each step of the sale, and then let them practice during the session?

If vendor training does not cover the right information or teach sales-people how to use it, you can help your vendor up the learning curve. If the vendor doesn't have sales guides, insist on them (data sheets are not usable: they are written for buyers, not sellers) If the guides aren't forthcoming, use co-op funds to create our own guides and training.

It's not easy to convince most vendors that they need to revise their training. First they have to see the problem. One way to show them the light is to conduct a "training review" a few weeks before the scheduled training and have them go through the essential product-training topics with you. If they score low, it may send them a message.

Another way to persuade them is to let trainees evaluate them by awarding a letter grade of A through F for each essential topic and a final grade for the session. Tell them you plan to post their session's average grade with the grades of the other vendors in a prominent location. Competing vendors will see how they fared.

Experience has shown that, given the competitive nature of the people who conduct the training, they will not be able to tolerate low scores for long. They will find and deliver the necessary information.-_R.L.



the new line of products. There is another crucial ingredient to success.

SKILLFUL USE

Let's revisit the definition of the selling process: the skillful use of the right information. We've sketched the topics that constitute usable information; now let's focus on skillful use. In the list of essential training topics, each line starting with "how to" is a skill, not a concept—and skills are taught quite differently from concepts. Skills are not taught by lecture but by process: The trainer demonstrates the skill, the learner practices the skill, and the trainer gives feedback to the learner.

When we teach people new to the computer industry, the most important step is showing them how to use the information we provide. For example, when I teach novices to advocate or say "good things" about a disk drive, I first provide them with a list of features and benefits for the drive. These items are in the form of short phrases, not sentences. This format allows the reps to create their own sentences, and thus to sound more natural.

Next I show them the difference between a feature and a benefit. But even when they understand the difference, they don't know how to advocate the product until I teach it as a skill. Once they know about features and benefits, I demonstrate a few times how to make complete "selling" sentences from the phrases; then they create their own. The learners practice doing this while I offer them constructive feedback. After each learner has practiced this step a few times successfully, they "own" the skill and can perform it almost automatically back on the job.

Few vendors coach reps to adequate levels of competency. Usually absent are the skill training steps that teach them to qualify a prospect, select the right product, present the features and benefits, and close. When vendors cover these steps, they do so by lecturing. But selling skills, like bike riding, are best learned by doing. And they are best taught by following these steps: Explain, demonstrate, practice, critique.

The "how-it-was-designed" approach to product training can be sufficient for reps who are experienced in selling the line or a similar product. Say, for example, they know all about hard drives. When the vendor introduces a new drive, and the vendor's trainer delivers the industry-standard design story, the experienced rep mentally wades through the data and picks out what she knows is usable information—what has worked in the past (another skill learned mainly by experience). The inexperienced rep, on the other hand, tries to remember everything the vendor says—and he still won't know where to start or how to conduct the sale.

With all this ineffective training going on, how do sales reps become proficient in selling new lines and products? The process usually goes something like this:

The motivated rep—the one still awake after bad training—will ask the vendor to go on "buddy" calls with her to visit people who likely need the product. After they make a few calls together, the novice sales rep may take over parts of the call. After a while, with a few words of advice from the vendor; she knows what to say and when. The result is a comfortable, competent and effective sales rep.



Many reps do come up to speed this way, but please note how they attained competence. The vendor rep, during the call, demonstrated how to use the product information, then allowed the learner to practice parts of the call, and perhaps even gave feedback after the call. In other words, it's good, old-fashioned skills training, and it works. Unfortunately, this infield, one-on-one training is not time- or cost effective, especially with technology products that have an average market life of about nine months.

BUT WILL THEY?

Finally, we turn to the question of motivation. Once a sales rep has the information and has practiced using it, he

may still choose not to sell the new product. Why? People often resist change—change often involves risk. Even after effective training, some reps won't risk selling a new product. They're afraid of looking dumb.

Immediate rewards will often motivate sales reps to take the risk. Spiffs, contests and awards may persuade them to put the

skills to work while they are fresh. Intel reinforced sales training with a great reward system. The reps were given a design-win quota for new chips. Those who made their quota went with a companion to Tahiti for 10 days. Intel's reps wanted to use their new skills, and they did.

Managing the mountains of information that come with new products is a huge challenge. But handsome rewards await those who master it. With proper training, reps can learn to sell new products and product lines in just hours. It worked at Intel, and it works at Seagate.
