

Small World, Big Challenge

By Andy Cohen



Roger Liston likes to tell a story about how he once got the attention of a group of Korean salespeople.

A little more than a year ago, Liston, director of sales training for Seagate Technology, was in Korea to head a training program for 25 salespeople. He wanted to open the session in a way that would make their reps feel comfortable, in order to close the culture gap between himself, an American, and the Koreans.

He walked into the classroom of salespeople and wrote on the board, "Roger Lee Liston." Then, after introducing himself to the group, he quickly went back to the board and crossed out "Liston" saying, "Just call me Roger Lee." A small gesture, but something Liston felt would help the audience open up to him. And it did. The trainees referred to him throughout the two-day selling skills course as Roger Lee. "Now, whenever anyone from that class calls my office," Liston says, "they ask for Roger Lee."

Seagate, a Scotts Valley, California maker of computer disk drives, sells its products throughout the world, from Germany to Singapore to Australia to France. Liston's responsibility is to make sure that all of the salespeople in these countries know how to sell Seagate's disk drives. But training across many cul-

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tures isn't easy. People have different ways of learning and of selling. Notions of time, hand gestures, and facial expressions vary from region to region. "For salespeople to get anything out of training, Liston says, "the classes should be tailored to what they experience every day."

Sound familiar? Well, it is. Training foreign-born and foreign-based salespeople of American companies—while a daunting task because of the numerous cultural differences—isn't much different than training salespeople in the United States. Trainers must know their students. Find out what their needs are, how they sell, how they build relationships, what their closing and negotiating techniques are. These are vital pieces of information for trainers of both American and international salespeople. "International training is not different," says Barbara Nelson, principal with Systema, a sales training company in Northbrook, Illinois. "The content still has to be relevant or you'll just be wasting salespeople's time—no matter what country you're in."

Kevin Corcoran, vice president of marketing of Learning International, a Stamford, Connecticut-based training company, says, "Selling skills are pretty much the same across all cultures. The abilities to listen, ask the right questions, and probe for needs are necessary to do business in any country."

But salespeople in some countries aren't used to doing business this way. An old way of selling—without any planning or prospecting—is the norm in many countries, so the salespeople need to be taught basics. The notion of calling on prospects and creating long-term partnerships with them is rarely understood by many international businesspeople—the quick-hit sale to a friend or referral prevails. But most companies with sophisticated global sales processes are using local salespeople in international markets—and teaching them an American way of selling. "Companies began to realize in the eighties that they need local salespeople to sell their products," says Eddie Wells, president of Van Kessel & Partners, a sales training company in Holland. "People expect to buy from sales reps they can relate to and who understand their language and culture. They're often cold towards Americans trying to sell them products."

As companies today face closing domestic markets, they are looking to find new customers internationally. The result? Global competition, the likes of which has never been seen before, and an increasingly crowded marketplace. Salespeople in this environment need to be prepared. They need to know the products they're selling and how best to sell them. In a word, they need training.

Teaching the Basics

Liston has a specific goal when he first trains foreign salespeople: get them up to speed on the little things that help close a deal. Such strategies as building a rapport with a client, finding their needs, providing solutions instead of just products, and negotiating a good deal are built into his program. "We constantly hear about these ideas in America," Liston says, "but they're not always being reinforced to salespeople of other countries."

At a sales training session last year in Sydney, Australia, Liston made a point to cover some basics before moving into new-product education. The 20 salespeople of A-Gate, Seagate's Australian subsidiary, were Liston's for two-and-a-half days. He wanted to make sure that they weren't defaulting to a commodity sell—where products are sold primarily on the basis of price, not value—a problem he sees frequently with international salespeople. "If people don't know how to provide value, how to show customers that they shouldn't be buying just on price, then they'll ultimately be selling a commodity," Liston says. "But if you give salespeople the necessary information to sell value, then they'll do it."

Before Liston begins instructing salespeople from another country, he spends some time with them—in their culture. He researches how they sell, the length of the sales cycle, what kind of customer relationships they have, and how the business culture affects sales. He spent a week in Australia before the training and noticed the culture to be extremely laid back—and that salespeople were approaching customers in the same relaxed way. They were creating great relationships, but not closing many deals on sales calls.

So he taught them some sales fundamentals: finding buyers for the product, asking qualifying questions, differentiating products from competitors', and closing at the appropriate time. "It was good for our salespeople to be reminded of these things," says Hugh Evans, general manager of A-Gate. "They sometimes get too caught up in just selling products, rather than how you get to the sale."

Liston says his Australian training session was successful because of a good mixture of important content and fun. "International audiences—especially Australian—want to have fun in training," he says. "If the information is important to their jobs and delivered in a somewhat fun way, then everybody will get something out of it."

Building Relationships

Getting close to customers, understanding their needs, and creating long-term partnerships with clients—these concepts are frequently discussed in America. But in international markets, they're even more important. "Overseas customers make business decisions on a very emotional basis," says Kevin Daley, president of Communispond, a New York-based training company that conducts sales seminars in more than 100 countries. "Before they buy, they want to be completely sure that they like and trust the people they're doing business with."

In Latin American countries, this emotional buying process is exaggerated—nobody buys anything until they're comfortable with the salesperson in front of them. As a result, whenever salespeople for ADD Latin America (a subsidiary of the Abbott Laboratories in Abbott Park, Illinois) are trained, they're constantly reminded about techniques to build and improve relationships. "People aren't as emotional in the United States as they are in Latin America," says David Charner of the English Resource Center in Caracas, Venezuela, which runs training programs for ADD. "Here we have to focus our training on searching for feelings, finding the hidden motivator that determines a buying decision."

ADD Latin America salespeople meet at least once a year for formal sales skills training. They also receive periodic product training when pharmaceuticals are introduced. But there's always a portion of each session set aside for understanding the importance of a good client-salesperson relationship. And the salespeople always welcome the information. Unlike in America, Charner says, Latin American reps are hungry for training. "Americans are more skeptical and uptight about being in a training session, but they look forward to it here." The reason? Increasing competition in Latin America and salespeople who welcome anything that they think will help them get ahead.

At the beginning of this year, ADD had a day-long training session where a new product line was scheduled to be introduced. But much of the morning was spent on something entirely different: listening. Salespeople were

surprised at how vital listening actually is to building relationships.

Reps were asked to think about the last deal they lost. Did they know why? What was the customer's reason for buying elsewhere? Did they know exactly what the customer was looking for? Many of the salespeople were stumped, because they hadn't listened well enough to their customers. "The exercise made them realize that they were asking questions, but not really listening to the customer," says Chela Jiminez, manager of training and organizational development for ADD Latin America. "Here, salespeople have to be humble and ready

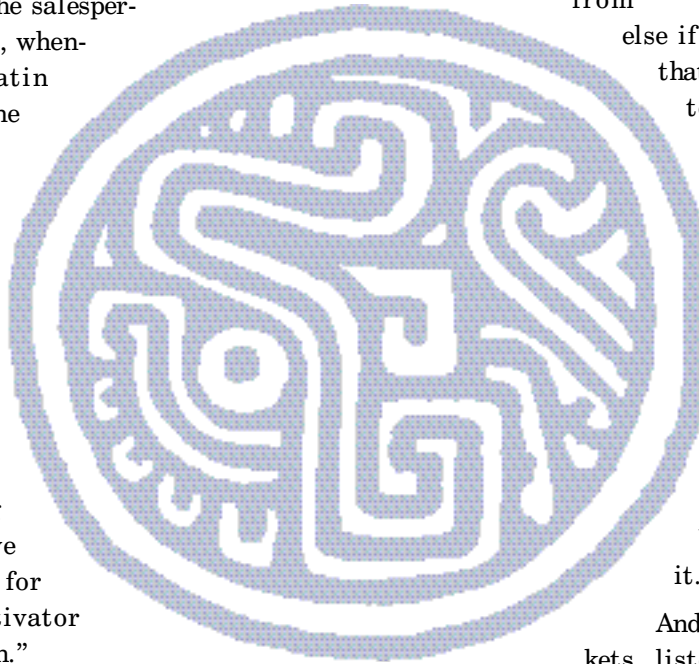
to listen. A customer will very often buy from someone

else if he gets the impression that a salesperson isn't listening to him." Jiminez adds that Latin American salespeople who truly listen to the customer are the ones who get ahead. "We stress the listening aspect of relationship building because customers are impressed by salespeople who do it."

And in international markets, listening can often be the difference between closing a sale and being shut out. "People from other countries do business simply because of how they feel about other people," says Dean Foster of Berlitz Cross Cultural in New York. "Everything is done based on personal relationships, and this starts with the salesperson listening intently to what the customer is saying."

Adapting a Program

While the sales skills taught in America can be translated to other countries, there are differences across cultures that need to be accounted for in training. Notions of time differ from country to country—some people don't pay attention to a clock and will always be late for meetings—as well as protocols and formalities. Also, the way people learn can change from culture to culture. For example, Americans tend



to focus on the end result when learning, whereas the French use deductive logic, emphasizing the process of how to get to an end. "Sales training needs to be tailored to different cultures," Foster says. "Salespeople should be allowed to learn in an environment they're used to."

For this reason, Wyeth-Ayerst International, a pharmaceutical company based in Radnor, Pennsylvania has designated training managers throughout the world. The company sells in more than 100 countries and views about 55 of them as major markets. With 50 international training managers, most cultural differences are taken into account when teaching salespeople. "We make sure that all of the countries have a say when we devise training plans," says Vince Peters, worldwide training manager. "As far as skills go, we keep the programs consistent throughout the world, but they often need to be adapted to fit the cultural differences of certain countries."

Peters has formed project teams from different countries to ensure that everyone's needs are being satisfied. He meets with the training representatives at least once a year and makes revisions to the skills classes whenever necessary. "It's good to always try to stay up-to-date," says Gianvito Bertoni, a Wyeth-Ayerst sales trainer in Italy, "because as salespeople develop their skills, what they need to learn will change."

A challenge that Wyeth-Ayerst currently faces is improving the business education levels of its worldwide salespeople. These reps tend to have medical backgrounds and sell to doctors based on relationships, contacts, or referrals.

There's no sales planning or prospecting for customers: just a call to a friend and a quick sale. But, as Peters says, times are changing—the salespeople need to have more busi-

ness sense because the climate is getting more competitive and crowded. Salespeople have formal sales skills training once a year, along with new product introductions and district training sessions throughout the year.

At these sessions, reps are taught ideas about sales planning and forecasting. Salespeople now need to know how to call on purchasers as well as doctors and need to plan a sales call. "We teach them how to ask questions before a sales call and how to find out as much information as possible before they're even in a buyer's office," Bertoni says. "It makes them think about a more current way of selling."

Bertoni and Peters use team exercises and case studies in their international training sessions. But not the traditional role-play. "It doesn't work with international salespeople," Peters says. "They just don't relate to it."

But giving situations such as planning out a mock sales call, with precall questions and needs assessment, is successful. "They get the salespeople involved in an environment they can understand and let them practice the skills they need to effectively sell," Bertoni says.

And they appeal to a European way of learning, focusing on the process rather than the result. These exercises were tailored this way so they would be effective in France and Italy, as opposed to results-type learning and role-plays in the United States. "International salespeople are receptive to the American way of selling," Peters says, "but the program has to be adapted to fit their cultures."

Just as Roger Liston had to do when training Korean salespeople. Teaching them the same information he would any place else in the world was the easy part. Getting them to talk back was nearly impossible. He learned that Asians are conditioned to listen to lectures when being trained, not participate. "I had to change the class so that I spoke most of the time, just telling them about the skills they need," Liston says. "But that's what international training is about—taking the same ideas and customizing them to different cultures."

Roger Liston is founder of Liston Sales Development Group.