Improving sales performance has never been more important for major global corporations. After years of recession-induced cost cutting, leaders are putting increasing emphasis on implementing go-to-market strategies to boost both top- and bottom-line results, and expecting their sales organizations to execute them.

Unfortunately, experts agree that most growth strategies fail. As competition from low-cost competitors increases, and aggressive buyers become even more demanding, it has become even harder to close the gap between go-to-market strategy as articulated by senior management and its profitable execution when the salesperson is face to face with the customer (see sidebar: “Sales Leadership Challenge: Close the Strategy Execution Gap”).
SALES TRAINING: “LEADERSHIP LEVER” TO EXECUTE GO-TO-MARKET STRATEGY

One “leadership lever” sales executives can use to address this challenge is sales training. To fully exploit the power of effective training, today’s leaders must understand and respond to important changes in the selling and training environment including:

- **Increased team access to powerful online technology** that allows companies better and more efficient ways to build and coach selling performance.
- **Higher levels of information overload** created by access to that same technology, as well as the increased flood of sales data from company email, CRM systems, and personal use of knowledge tools like Google search.
- **Intensifying response time compression**, an increased pressure from customers and colleagues for “24/7” availability, increased speed of response, and reduced time out of field to quickly solve problems.
- **Higher expectations from a new generation of trainees** that expects to leverage technology, but also demands involvement, participation, and an “I want to get it when I need it, where I need it, and how I need it” attitude towards sales skills and knowledge.

NEW REALITY: PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY MUST CHANGE

The bottom line: In this environment, approaches to selling and sales training that worked in the past won’t get the job done. The selling and buying environments have changed. Leadership’s approach to sales performance improvement must also change.

The new realities of selling, buying, and information access are prompting successful sales leaders to play by new rules as they make decisions about sales training deployment. Here are five most often found at the top of the list:

1. Focus on value creation, not selling tactics.
2. Focus on habits, not just skills.
3. Focus on simplicity, utility, and “stickiness.”
4. Focus on technology-supported coaching and reinforcement.
5. Focus on sustainable change management.

*Let’s explore these in more detail...*
FIVE NEW RULES TO GUIDE SALES LEADERS

1 **Focus on value creation, not selling tactics.**

In an era of intensifying competition and fierce negotiations with buyers, tactical selling approaches simply don’t work. The key to sales success is creating both business and personal value throughout the sales process, especially value the buyer is not currently considering in their decision making. Building skills in mapping this value, then provoking it into the customer conversation, is a critical success factor in today’s selling environment. Leaders must ensure that a full exploration of value is a core component of their sales team’s training.

2 **Focus on habits, not just skills.**

Effective selling and negotiating is counterintuitive. For example, under pressure most sales professionals:

- present when they should instead probe for deeper understanding;
- talk about price when the customer asks rather than deferring the conversation until value is created;
- give away costly concessions to lower the tension rather than exchange value and make trades.

In his best-selling book, *The Power of Habit*, author Charles Duhigg shows how changing bad habits takes a level of awareness and personal management that is not typically found in traditional sales training. The implication: leaders must ensure that training design is highly experiential and discovery-based (to build personal insight into habits needing to change), then reinforced through technology supported coaching.

3 **Focus on simplicity, utility, and “stickiness.”**

Sales professionals often complain that sales training is too complex, process-oriented, and unmemorable. And in today’s “information overload” environment, they are often right. Research has shown that 80–90% of learning is lost one month after training if not immediately used and reinforced in an ongoing way. Sales leaders must demand that all sales training focuses not on *everything*, but on the critical few *most important* things that generate the greatest impact…and then insist reinforcement and coaching activities are incorporated so the new behaviors “stick” back in the field.

4 **Focus on technology-supported coaching and reinforcement.**

Most sales organizations use technology to manage and share data, and (in the case of CRM systems) to keep track of sales pipelines and related sales process information. In larger corporations these functions are often deployed through complex portals that most sales professionals underutilize. One application of online technology that leaders *should* focus more on is virtual coaching support for the sales team. Recent developments in smart phone apps, low-cost dissemination of media (like videos and podcasts), social media tools (like the “Chatter” function in Salesforce.com), and best practices data curation make it possible for an organization to deploy systems that provide “real time” technology-supported coaching to sales reps in the field…and also prompt more productive manager-rep coaching conversations.

5 **Focus on sustainable change management.**

Today’s most successful sales leaders know that generate top and bottom line growth, they need to do more than individual skill building. They must transform their sales organizations to make them more competitive, nimble, and customer-value focused. To accomplish this, they must look at training as a change management platform, a strategic tool for moving from the current state to a more profitable and sustainable future state. When approached in this light, the leader’s role is to ensure that training is implemented as part of a larger process that includes proven change management approaches, including: making senior executive sponsorship highly visible; deploying sales training in a cascading “top down” manner; communicating a strong “why change” message; providing extra support to first line managers to build their buy-in and coaching skills; ensuring alignment of organizational performance management systems with the effort; and implementing ongoing communication of results and best practices to maintain momentum.
According to experts from leading universities and consultancies, most growth strategies fail. One important reason for this is described in *The Last Link: Closing the Gap that is Sabotaging Your Business* by Gregg Crawford, CEO of BayGroup International.

Leaders are typically strong at developing corporate strategy and then translating it into high-level, go-to-market sales strategy. They often fail to close the “last link,” however: the gap between articulated sales strategy and the “how to” of profitable execution with customers.

This is of course where a leadership focus on the right kind of sales training can pay off. “Gap closing” sales training has these critical characteristics:

- Clearly communicates of the “why” of new go-to-market strategy, not just the “what.”

- Breaks down the steps a salesperson must take in their typical sales process to execute sales that support the new strategy. These are often described as a series of *Pivotal Agreements* with the customer, negotiations during the sales cycle that advances the sales process towards optimal deal configuration, size, and profitability.

- Emphasizes the comprehensive mapping of both business and personal value resident in the company’s solutions, with a focus on value the customer is not currently considering.

- Provides real-world, discovery-based classroom experiences that affect not just the knowledge and skills of participants, but also their attitudes toward using new selling approaches to provoke a more productive selling conversation.

- Includes measurement and reporting of results and best practices. This ensures ongoing support for the initiative, provides additional reinforcement for new selling behavior, and ensures that lessons learned in the field are shared widely.
Thomas Edison once said: “Vision without execution is hallucination.” In today’s rapidly changing business environment, leaders must not only envision the profitable future, but also take the necessary steps to arm their sales organizations to execute that vision with customers. Leaders who use sales training as a strategic tool to transform their organizations will be long-term winners, and their organizations will reap the rewards. Here are five best practices for maximizing results:

• **Keep it simple.** When it comes to effective sales training in today’s high-speed business world, simple and memorable content always trumps comprehensive and complex approaches. Avoid the temptation to overload your sales team with complicated processes, models, and information. Today’s best sales training solutions provide something less like a detailed operators manual and more like a dashboard GPS device. In other words, they provide “just-in-time, just enough” guidance to get the sales professional from their current “location” to the goal, without extraneous side trips.

• **Provide discovery-oriented learning experiences.** The first step in changing poor selling habits isn’t to introduce new skills. Instead, it’s to provide an experience that “holds the mirror up” to current intuitive, habitual behavior (and helps the sales professional see and feel the downside to that behavior). Only when trainees are motivated to change will they be open to changing their habits, and to using new, more counterintuitive selling approaches.

• **Focus on coaches and leaders first.** Successful leaders leverage sales training as a vehicle for sales organization transformation. This typically means winning the “hearts and minds” of leaders and coaches before training the front-line sales staff. When management understands and supports training the likelihood of achieving desired results improves dramatically.

• **Connect technology to coaching.** Most companies are using a “blended” approach to sales training that includes a mix of live and online learning. Today’s most successful sales leaders are going beyond this, using online technology, social networking, and rich media not just to educate, but also to support better coaching and on-the-job application of new selling approaches.

---

*Ron D’Andrea is President and Paul Hennessey is Executive Vice President of BayGroup International, a global performance improvement firm that helps corporate leaders achieve critical profit improvement, cost containment, team effectiveness, and B2B sales goals quickly, and with high impact.*
**About BayGroup International**

BayGroup International partners with corporate executives to improve shareholder value by:

- Helping execute corporate strategies successfully;
- Ensuring that key business initiatives demonstrate significant ROI; and
- Building skills across the organization for creating profitable agreements, both internally and externally.

BayGroup International implements strategic projects that include research, highly tailored performance improvement development, Web 2.0 technology support, and the tracking of results. Our work in client organizations is supported and reinforced through executive leadership communication campaigns, management coaching, and online performance support tools. Using our proven behavior change approach has helped clients achieve desired business results and improve the ability of key employees to build better agreements with:

- Customers, especially when competitive sales pressure threatens profits.
- Suppliers and other outside parties, whose increasing costs can erode the bottom line.
- Internal team members and between individuals, where failure to handle tough, contentious issues can threaten quality, customer service, restructuring, and other strategic initiatives.
- Strategic partners, where poor agreements can threaten the success of mergers and acquisitions, as well as other mission-critical alliances (in areas such as distribution, research and development, and marketing).

By partnering with BayGroup International, clients achieve significant improvements in human performance and millions of dollars in bottom-line results.

Since its founding in 1980, BayGroup International has built a select client list of major global corporations, focusing on the technology, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, transportation, consumer products, and financial services industries. Our consultants have worked in North and South America, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. We serve our clients from offices in major cities around the world.

To find out more, contact us at:

**BayGroup International**

**Corporate Headquarters:**
2200 Larkspur Landing Circle
Larkspur, California 94939 USA
Tel: 415.464.4400
Fax: 415.464.4405
www.baygroup.com

© BayGroup International. All rights reserved.