The Guide to Sustaining the Impact of Sales Training

Using Effective Coaching Methods to Improve Sales Performance
Overview

Corporations rely on their sales organizations to not only drive revenue, but to create valuable relationships with decision-makers within their industry. To do so, many companies invest heavily in the training and development of their sales professionals – but how do they ensure consistent use of these new skills?

Based on this research, the majority of companies provide a mixture of formal and informal sales training to all of their employees. More formalized sales training programs are reserved for sales management and sales professionals.

Formal and informal training are defined as:

**FORMAL TRAINING** involves structured courses or sessions that are aligned with learning and business goals.

**INFORMAL TRAINING** is generally learner-driven and performed on an ad hoc, or as needed, basis.

The purpose of this research is to better understand how organizations sustain the impact of their sales training, particularly using coaching techniques. In May 2013, 120 companies contributed to the study, with more than eighty percent (80%) representing Sales and Human Resources departments in a variety of industries.

This report will not only explore how companies currently provide sales training, but will also identify:

- Effective approaches for sustaining the impact of sales training
- Common challenges when coaching to sustain the impact of sales training
- Best practices when coaching to sustain the impact of sales training

Finally, the report compares the practices, technologies and tools, and evaluation methods used by various companies, highlighting the differences between those considered effective and ineffective at sales coaching. By examining these differences, sales and learning leaders can pinpoint areas for improvement within their own sales training programs – and improve them accordingly.
Key Findings

- Respondents consider product training and coaching the most important modules and tools for effectively training their companies’ sales force.

- Approximately 65% of respondents believe that their companies’ coaching programs are effective at sustaining the impact of sales training.

- Companies that consider their training organizations **EFFECTIVE** at sales coaching:
  
  - Provide more formal sales training than ineffective companies, particularly to sales management.
  
  - Devote more to the sustainment of sales training than ineffective companies. However, effective and ineffective companies devote the same amount to planning sales training initiatives.
  
  - Provide formal coaching programs more than twice as often as ineffective companies.
  
  - Provide more consistent sales coaching than ineffective companies. In fact, the majority (73%) of ineffective companies provide sales coaching on an ad hoc basis, if at all.
  
  - Measure the impact of sales management training using pre-defined metrics three times as often as ineffective companies.
  
  - Evaluate feedback from salespeople, managers and sales leadership two to four times more often than ineffective companies.
  
  - Use skills gaps analysis three times as often as ineffective companies.
  
  - Meet more often to discuss the effectiveness of coaching to sustain the impact of sales training – and 26% of ineffective companies never meet at all.
  
  - Plan to use social, collaborative learning tools and mobile learning more often to support coaching than ineffective companies.

- Gamification, blogs and microblogs are the tools and technologies that respondents are **least likely to use** to support coaching for sustaining the impact of sales training.
Most Important Modules & Tools

Figure 2 demonstrates that product training and coaching are considered the most important modules and tools for effectively training a company’s sales force. Interestingly, learning leaders consider learning technologies and social, collaborative tools as less beneficial when developing and delivering sales training.

Figure 2
Coaching Effectiveness

Approximately 65% of respondents believe that their companies’ coaching programs are either very effective or somewhat effective at sustaining the impact of sales training. Since coaching is considered critical for effective sales training, these numbers are promising.

Figure 3

However, it is important to understand why these companies consider their coaching effective. Throughout this report, the effective group and ineffective group will be compared to identify and explore what effective companies are doing differently.
Sales Training Investment

Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of sales training investment that their companies devote to each stage of training: planning, delivery and sustainment. Figure 4 demonstrates that the majority of sales training investment is devoted to the *delivery* of sales training.

When comparing the sales training investment of the effective and ineffective groups, the effective group devotes almost ten percent more of their budget to the sustainment of sales training. Effective companies spend roughly the same percentage on planning, and slightly less on the delivery of sales training.
Sales Management Training Practices

When implementing training for sales management, companies use a range of practices, with delivering training using a variety of methods cited as the most common.

Figure 7

When comparing the effective and ineffective groups, effective companies measure the impact of sales management training using pre-defined metrics three times as often as ineffective companies. Additionally, effective companies do the following almost twice as often as their ineffective counterparts: modify training programs to meet learners’ needs and business goals, perform needs analysis, and define metrics to measure training effectiveness.

Figure 8
Coaching Approaches

When asked which approach best defines their organizations’ coaching, 35% of respondents said they provide sales coaching as needed, based on the coaches’ observations and experience.

Figure 9

When comparing the two groups, 60% of effective companies provide consistent sales coaching that is either based on their underlying sales methodology or the coaches’ observations and feedback. On the other hand, the majority (73%) of ineffective companies provide sales coaching on an ad hoc basis, if at all.

Figure 10
Coaching Practices

There are a range of practices and tools that companies can use to support their sales training initiatives – and more particularly – to sustain the impact of sales training. Respondents cited observational feedback as the most common practice used when coaching, followed by one-on-one sessions and goal-setting and review.

Figure 11

When comparing the two groups, effective companies use *every single practice* more often than ineffective companies. Additionally, they implement skills gap analysis, group sessions with feedback from coaches and sales methodology review with feedback from coaches *three times as often* as ineffective companies.
Developing Coaches

Respondents were asked how their companies develop and prepare coaches to sustain the impact of sales training. Most often, companies provide informal sales coaching information, techniques or best practices as opposed to more formal sales coaching methods.

**Figure 12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Effective Group, N=70</th>
<th>Ineffective Group, N=38</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informal sales coaching information, techniques, or best practices</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Train the Sales Trainer&quot; programs</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal sales coaching programs</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal training on generic coaching practices</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top performers to lead others by example</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced sales employees to lead others</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make sales managers responsible for developing coaches</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effective companies provide formal sales coaching programs *more than twice as often* as ineffective companies. Contrarily, ineffective companies seem to rely on their sales managers and top performers to effectively coach sales employees.

**Figure 13**
When asked how their companies currently measure the effectiveness of coaching to sustain the impact of sales training, approximately three-fourths of respondents said they do so by tracking sales performance metrics (Figure 14).

When juxtaposing the measurement methods used by the effective and ineffective groups, it is clear that effective organizations assess coaching effectiveness more often. Effective companies also evaluate feedback from salespeople, managers and sales leadership two to four times more often than ineffective companies. See Figure 15.
Meeting to Discuss Coaching Effectiveness

The majority of respondents describe meeting with sales leadership monthly or quarterly to discuss the effectiveness of coaching to sustain the impact of sales training (Figure 16). Effective companies report meeting more often – while 26% of ineffective companies say they never meet at all.

**Figure 16**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Effective Group, N=70</th>
<th>Ineffective Group, N=38</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi-weekly</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yearly</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tools to Support Coaching

Respondents were asked which tools and technologies their companies currently use or plan to use to support coaching for sustaining the impact of sales training. Companies currently use emails, workshops and role playing most often to support coaching. In general, effective companies use tools and technologies to support coaching more often than ineffective companies.

The most common tools and technologies that respondents report planning to use are reinforcement classes (38.3%), mobile learning (37.7%) and short e-learning pieces (36.6%). Effective companies cited the top three tools and technologies they plan to use as: social, collaborative learning tools, mobile learning, and reinforcement classes.

More than 50% of respondents said they either don’t use or don’t plan to use gamification (63.1%) or blogs and microblogs (55.8%) to support coaching for sustaining the impact of sales training.

Figure 17
Best Practices

Respondents cited the following best practices for coaching to sustain the impact of sales training (in order of most to least often mentioned):

- **Monitor the effectiveness** of coaching programs by gathering feedback from coaches, employees and sales leadership and create an improvement plan to build from.
- **Create a mentoring program** to partner new employees with more experienced salespeople.
- **Facilitate peer-to-peer learning** through team exercises, knowledge centers or sharing best practices.
- **Involve experiential training** through:
  - Role plays
  - Ride-alongs or field trips with senior sales representatives
  - On-the-job training and reinforcement

Challenges

Respondents cited the following as their greatest challenges when coaching to sustain the impact of sales training (in order of most to least often mentioned):

- Finding time to train sales personnel and devoting the necessary **RESOURCES** (e.g., budget and staff) to do so.
- Ensuring that coaching standards and messaging are **CONSISTENT** across roles and geographic regions.
- With market pressures constantly shifting, many struggle with what training and coaching topics or methodologies are **RELEVANT** to their sales team.
- Ensuring that salespeople and leadership are **OPEN** to new training and **ENGAGED** during coaching practices.
- Finding and developing adequate **COACHES**.
- Developing proper **METRICS** for gauging behavioral changes and measuring improvement.
Moving Forward

When developing sales training initiatives, learning leaders are responsible for providing training on the topics and methodologies that are relevant and well-suited to their companies’ business objectives. In addition, two of their primary goals are to ensure that sales training is not only effective, but also sustainable.

Through the contribution of learning leaders, this study has explored how companies currently provide sales training, and more specifically how they sustain training’s impact using coaching practices. When examining the training and coaching methods of effective companies in further detail, there are several practices that they use more often – and that deserve the attention of sales and learning leaders.

Overall, effective companies provide more formal sales training and more consistent sales coaching, as opposed to the informal, ad hoc training offered by ineffective companies. Additionally, effective companies take time to analyze skills gaps and define proper metrics when planning sales training, and evaluate and discuss sales training effectiveness once training is delivered. This approach allows companies to deliver training that is not only relevant to sales professionals, but that can be easily modified based on both the feedback of stakeholders and business performance.

By developing more comprehensive, formal sales training and coaching programs, learning leaders can better address the skills that are essential for sales professionals, and ensure that these skills are being employed correctly and consistently over the long-term.
Demographics

Company Size

Approximately 56% of respondents represent companies with 500 employees or more.

Figure 18

Industries

Fifty percent (50%) of respondents are from the top five industries: Business Services/Consulting, Technology, Banking/Finance, Telecommunications and Manufacturing.

Figure 19
Departments

Eighty percent (80%) of respondents hold positions in Sales or Human Resources.

Job Roles

Sixty-five percent (65%) of respondents hold leadership titles (e.g., management or executive-level roles).
About This Research

AXIOM Sales Force Development, LLC.

For more than twenty years, AXIOM has been elevating the sales profession by transforming the way sales organizations engage with customers and sales managers lead and coach. AXIOM clients enjoy unique solutions that combine sales methodology, integrated software solutions and implementation, and consulting services that deliver exceptional results including improved customer satisfaction, increased revenue and margins, and lower customer and sales team churn.

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