Why Sales Training Doesn’t Work

And What to Do About It!
Selling isn’t a great sport in which to come second. In the world of “winner takes all”, anything that gives you a small increase in performance relative to the competition can have a huge impact on your performance. It’s no surprise, therefore, that salespeople and business developers are some of the most frequently trained individuals in the business world.

And yet…we all know that much of the time, sales training has little impact. While the event may be great, and intentions good, all too quickly, salespeople revert to known behaviours.

**Why is this? And what can we do about it?**

**Does sales training work?**

The research shows that a great deal of sales training doesn’t have the impact that it was intended to have. For example:

- Up to 80% of new skills are lost within 1 week of training if not used - ASTD
- Up to 85% of sales training fails to deliver a positive ROI – HR Chally
- 87% of new skills are lost within a month of the training – Xerox

Achieving significant impact is difficult, and requires far more than a great training event. For example, one client invested heavily in communication and training around the role of sales managers as coaches. The training was extremely well received and clear expectations were set, yet when the take-up of coaching was measured a month after the training, fewer than 15% of managers had come close to meeting the standards. Knowing this made it possible to address the issue, and with effort that figure is now closer to 60% and growing. However, one shudders to think how little changes after most training.

What does this mean for your organisation… and for you? How much time and money has been wasted, but more importantly, how much revenue and growth has been forgone?

**What’s going wrong?**

Most training departments and vendors understand that standalone training is only part of the answer. But while most are geared up for running excellent training courses, following through is a great deal harder. It’s also a much lower margin activity than putting a trainer into a room with a group of salespeople.

As a result, we see a lot of good words, but with little impact. “Gain commitment from the top”. “Align sales training with other initiatives”. “Follow-through with coaching”. All are correct, but none seem to make much difference. Why?

Our research suggests some possible reasons:
Fundamentally, improving sales performance is not simply about building skills, but about changing how some very specific types of individual behave in their day to day life. Sales training isn’t a fire-and-forget exercise; it’s only ever going to be the beginning of the process.

The sad tale of Jill and Sam

If improving sales performance is about changing human behaviour, it follows that to get a grip on why even the best training can fail to deliver, we need to get down to the level of the individual and their experience of the training process. Please meet two salespeople for whom training wasn’t enough: Jill Wilna, and Sam Canna.

The field of situational leadership tells us that there are two main dimensions that affect an individual’s performance on a specific task: their motivation (“Will”), and their ability (“Skill”).

To give us a good coverage of the issues involved, we have chosen Jill and Sam from opposite corners of the Skill/Will matrix. Jill is capable, but unmotivated. Sam is keen, but unable to perform. Let’s take a closer look at their stories, to try and understand how they got this way.

Recognise any of these…?

- Account managers and business developers perceive changing their behaviour as a risk;
- Sales training is often insufficiently tailored to be truly relevant and overcome that risk;
- New skills are rarely applied straight away. As a result, they’ve faded by the time they are applied so success is unlikely, which in turn makes another attempt very unlikely;
- New approaches are rarely built into everyday tools and processes, whether that be recruiting, account reviews, or performance appraisals;
- There is often a lack of genuine ongoing coaching, reinforcement and support;
- Sales leaders rarely continue to ask the right questions or measure whether behaviours are changing.
Jill Wilna’s story

Jill walked out of the training course having been able to absorb the new skills, but not convinced of their importance or relevance to her and her customers. This view is reinforced because she doesn’t see others exhibiting the new behaviours, and she is rapidly drawn back into her normal routine. There are no repercussions from this, and her manager doesn’t even ask about it. Jill may use her new skills on occasion – probably without realising it – but the bulk of the impact has been lost.

This is actually quite a complex sequence of events, but once the specific issues have been identified, one can start to develop ways to resolve them, as shown below:

- Leverage early adopters
- Build buzz
- Trumpet early wins
- Real tailoring
- Rigorous application, in a coached environment
- Force to use, to get over the ‘adoption hurdle’
- Build urgency
- Quantify impact of lost opportunities
- Coaching skills and tools
- Measure coaching!
Sam Canna’s tale

Sam’s experience is entirely different. Even though he put on a brave face and commented about there being “nothing really new here”, he actually struggled during the workshop. He left keen to apply what he had learned, but he’s now a bit overwhelmed and doesn’t know where to start. When he tries to apply his new skills, he finds it difficult and time-consuming, and the results don’t seem to follow. His manager is keen to help, but lacks the right skill in coaching and/or the new sales techniques to make much of a difference.

As with Jill, it’s possible to create strategies to overcome each of the specific barriers faced by Sam as he tries to apply his new skills:

- Streaming
- Clear action plans driving application
- Focus on subset of skills
- Reconnect workshops
- Self-study
- Attend course again as coach
- Account clinics
- Help desk
- Model desired behaviour
- Application tools and resources
- e.g. around vertical markets
- Coaching and ‘home schooling’
- Use early adopters as advisors
Turning it around

As with most change management problems, there is no single “silver bullet” that will improve the effectiveness of sales training; the solution is multi-faceted, and the follow-up process is one that deserves to be treated seriously and managed hard. After all, what would be the impact on your business if every salesperson was 10% more effective?

Nevertheless, no good change program can afford to be too complex. So here, based on Imparta’s experience of global sales effectiveness rollouts, is our list of the Top 10 Things to Make Sales Training Work:

10. Start from the top to design the rollout process, and gain commitment to the leaders’ roles;
9. Focus the training on key skill gaps to avoid overwhelming people;
8. Tailor (really tailor it!) it to different groups to ensure relevance while creating a common language across the organisation;
7. Quantify the impact of not applying new behaviours; publicise and celebrate successes;
6. Build the new approaches into your everyday tools and processes (e.g. sales reviews, account planning meetings, performance reviews);
5. Use managers and early adopters to coach. And then coach them on how well they’re coaching;
4. Think about this as change management. Consider both skill and will;
3. Get people to apply skills right after the course itself. Check that they have;
2. Create pull-through by having salespeople report achievements to senior team after a period (say 3-6 months, depending on your cycle time);

And our number one:
1. Measure results. This can be as formal as a business impact study, or as informal as asking the right questions on a regular basis – but measure results. If you don’t, there won’t be any.

As with any change process, you can expect to see a gradual take-up of new behaviours and skills. There will always be early adopters, and there will always be people who are never going to adapt (see Fig 1. overleaf). The challenge is to reach the main-stream as quickly and effectively as possible.
The good news is that getting it right can have a significant impact. Imparta’s clients have measured revenue increases of up to £60m (approx. US$100m) from properly implemented programmes, and when coaching is embedded as a way of life, these programmes continue to deliver results long after the initial investment.

Next steps

If you’re involved in improving sales performance, whether as a business or sales leader, or from the HR/Learning and Development side, here are a few questions to help determine whether you need to take a fresh look at your top-line performance.

**Do you have...**

- An understanding of where the strengths and weaknesses of your current process lie, and what the impact might be of improving deal size, cycle time and conversion rates?
- A strategy for managing sales effectiveness as a change process?
- A clear roadmap that includes core training but goes well beyond to incorporate reinforcement, coaching and application?
- A robust process for measuring training impact at various levels (reaction, knowledge transfer; behaviour change; business impact)?
- Alignment between the wider the organisation (including marketing, service and operations) and your sales strategy?
About the author

Richard Barkey is the founder and Chief Executive of Imparta, a company that specialises in helping companies around the world to achieve and sustain significant improvements in sales and marketing performance.

Prior to founding Imparta in 1998, Richard worked at McKinsey & Co., where he was involved in planning and implementing large-scale change management projects involving, for example, a major UK retail bank, the sales force of an aggregates company, and a major UK supermarket chain. In his last three years at McKinsey, Richard pioneered the development of simulation-based training and it was this work that sowed the seeds for Imparta.

Richard holds a first class degree in Engineering from Cambridge University and an MBA with Distinction from the Harvard Business School. He is a sought-after speaker on topics to do with learning and e-learning, sales and strategy.

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About Imparta

Imparta helps companies to achieve significant and lasting improvements in sales and marketing effectiveness, combining researched content with a deep understanding of how adults learn, and how to overcome barriers to change. Imparta’s tailored, “best of breed” approach ranges from a single workshop, to a sophisticated simulation-based learning or a full Sales or Marketing Academy covering the full range of reinforcement, application, coaching, measurement and accreditation.

The company is already one of the largest sales and marketing training companies in the UK, and has featured two years running in the Times TechTrack Top 100 for the fastest-growing technology-based businesses. Imparta is global in scope, with clients including GE, O2, HP, MeadWestvaco, Lucent and WPP. You can find Imparta at www.imparta.com.