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Who Needs Training?

One of my favorite movies is “Stripes” starring Bill Murray. I particularly like the scene where he leads his disheveled platoon on to the parade ground to the tune of “do wah diddy diddy do” and dazzles the commanding general with their precision drill routine. They had trained themselves when their sergeant was “blown up sir!” in a training accident. Of course in the movie everything worked out in spite of their lack of proper training. This is seldom the case in real life.

I recently received an e-mail from a sales manager I had met at a regional conference. His challenge was a rep that did not see the value of training. The rep felt that his years of experience selling advertising had taught him everything he needs to know. This rep had a bad case of what sales trainer Joe Bonura calls the IKTA virus (I Know That Already). I personally believe this is one of the most dangerous conditions that any rep or manager can contract. It can be fatal to your career if you let it persist. Sales experience is invaluable but it is not enough. In his book, *Talent is Overrated*; Geoff Colvin cited studies that found that many people’s skills actually decline as they become more experienced. These people become lazy and allow themselves to slip into bad habits. The best people learn from their experience and use it in conjunction with new information to become better at what they do. I was once told to hold on to the old, as long as it was good, and grab hold of the new just as soon as it is better. I think this was outstanding advice.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that I am a full time sales trainer. I tend to see training as at least part of the solution to just about every problem. I may be a training extremist, but this position is based on my observations of the successful people I’ve encountered in my life. It is no accident that the top people in any field become the top people. They rise because they devote great effort to ongoing self-development. Here are some thoughts on training:

Why training is never complete.

Will Rogers once said, “Even if you are on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.” The fast pace of business today demands that we keep our skills current. Professionals in any field need to keep their credentials current. Doctors, lawyers, accountants etc. are required to take continuing education credits to maintain their certification. Sales people may not have to keep their license current, but our profession is just as complicated. We need to keep abreast of the changes affecting our industry. Evolving technologies and increased competition means the sales environment is constantly changing. Some of the

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biggest competitive challenges we face today did not even exist five or ten years ago. As new challenges arise we must learn to deal with them. Likewise, as new tools and techniques become available, we must learn to use them to stay competitive. I started my sales career about 20 BC (Before Computers). I have had to work to learn how to effectively use e-mail, PowerPoint and the Internet. I have also had to learn to work with and sell to people who grew up in the digital age.

Our prospects have become increasingly sophisticated. Recently I read an article on the cultural effects of personal computers that contained a small test. There was a list of ten words each in a different typeface; across from this was a list of 10 font names. The task was to match the font name to the examples. I am proud to say that I aced the test, as do most people. The average person is much more involved in design today. To sell today's graphically oriented customer we need to provide them with good ideas and well designed ads. People are also more aware of sales techniques and marketing tricks. If I attempted to use some of the closing tools that I learned at the beginning of my sales career (Ben Franklin anyone?), I would be laughed out of the client's office. Prospects today are much more knowledgeable and expect more from a sales person. We need to stay fresh to engage and persuade today's advertisers.

What you need to know

I once told someone that I was a sales trainer and they responded, "That must be easy, how much do you have to know just to talk to people." I simply responded, "You'd be surprised." Selling is a knowledge-based career. Advertising sales people have to be well versed in the following:

Products—Sales people need to know their product line. They need to know the features, advantages and benefits of each product they sell and how to match them to the prospects needs. They need to know how to design effective ads and create strong campaigns for their clients. They need to know how to process that advertising and make their ideas come alive in their publications and websites.

Sales techniques—sales people must be master communicators and know how to persuade prospects to adopt their ideas. They need to understand how to get in front of clients and get their point across quickly and clearly. Sales people must learn to adapt their presentations to a wide variety of accounts and personalities. Successful reps understand the buyer's psychology and what motivates them to make a purchase.

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Markets and business—Sales people need to understand their market and where their publication fits in it. They need to understand the fundamentals of business and the challenges their clients face. Their knowledge makes them an invaluable resource for their advertisers.

Taking responsibility for your future

Who is responsible for your training? As a professional trainer a lot of people think this job belongs to me. Some others think it is their sales manager. I believe we are all responsible for our own training. Smart sales people give a great deal of thought to the development of their skills. They make training a structured part of their activities. I make a point of devoting a minimum of 15 to 30 minutes every business day to sales related reading. I have done this for over 30 years. Allowing for 2 weeks vacation, these 15 daily minutes add up to 1,875 hours of dedicated sales training. Sales training increases our ability to earn a living; a daily investment in polishing our skills generates a healthy ROI for years to come.

Training resources

Here are a few resources you can use to develop your skills:

Training Classes—You should take advantage of any classes offered by your company and when possible attend regional and national conferences to take training. Invest in classes offered by local colleges and private firms. I have always felt that if I learn one thing that makes me a better sales person, a class was a good investment of my time. Of course you must be an active participant to reap the full rewards of any class. Pay attention and ask lots of questions.

Books/Magazines—There are literally thousands of books on sales and marketing in print. Mark Twain said, “The person who does not read has no advantage over the person who cannot read.” Planned business reading will give you a definite advantage over competitors who do not read to broaden their knowledge.

Audiobooks/Videos—Most sales people spend a lot of time in their cars. Sales books on CD are a great way to put this “windshield time” to good advantage. You can become a graduate of what Zig Ziglar has called “Automobile University.” To learn in the comfort of your own living room, videos are a great resource.

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Web sites—There is an amazing amount of great information available on the web. AFCP.org is a good example with dozens of excellent industry specific articles just a click away.

Mentors/Coaches—As a young salesperson I was in awe of the old veterans that I worked with. When I ran into an objection I couldn't handle, I would ask them, and usually got good advice. I have also been blessed by the opportunity to work with some great sales managers. Seek out experienced people who are willing to share their skills with you. Experiment with their techniques and adapt them to your personal sales approach. Never miss an opportunity to network and learn from other business people.

Conclusion

Like most things that are worthwhile, training is not easy. Continuous education is the key to continuous success. The world is constantly changing and we will be lost in the shuffle if we do not continue to grow and develop our skills. I think Muhammed Ali said it best: "I hated every minute of training, but I said, "Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion."

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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