Making Sales Sizzle:
Seven Steps for Sales Success Through Training

by Carolyn Merriman and Jill Stratton

The sales function is becoming more accepted as a way to build relationships, enhance referral patterns, and drive more traffic through the door. Planned and executed well, a sales function will deliver specific, measurable results.

Product knowledge is key to success in sales. Yet success requires much more than simply knowing what the hospital offers and how to access its services. To be effective, a hospital sales program must include extensive and ongoing training in both product knowledge and selling skills.

The sales function isn't intended to replace a hospital's marketing, advertising, or communication strategies. Instead, it can supplement those initiatives and serve as a key vehicle to reach a target audience. Consider the following seven steps and some suggested actions as you build or grow the role of sales and sales training in your organization.

1. **Develop a training plan.**
   This plan clarifies expectations, explains organizational culture, and defines early deliverables for the new salesperson. Tactically, it should map out what you want the employee to accomplish in the first six months. Customize this plan based on the new hire's skills and background. It's important to set aside this time for the individual to fully learn about the organization and its products. Whatever sales activity you lose in the field during this time, you'll more than recoup later by having an individual fully equipped to represent your organization.

   Training action: The salesperson should meet with managers of five to seven key clinical areas and develop a written summary of information and opportunities for each area. Have new hires create a feature/benefit description of the offering coupled with their perspective of the optimal patient and referring customer for the service. This summary and the supporting documentation become part of a product reference book for the entire sales team, and the exercise can help the manager test a new employee's level of learning and capability.

2. **Provide product exposure.**
   Specific product training and exposure help the salesperson become immersed in the organization's products and services from the customer's point of view. Keep in mind that the customer might be a physician, an office manager, or a patient. The salesperson needs to speak the customer's language, know the people who interact with the customer, understand the actual procedures, be aware of staff and patient processes, and see how both the referring physician and the patient benefit from the service.

Training action: Have the new sales employee shadow different employees within a specific area, such as the imaging department, over several days. The shadowing begins by observing registration and scheduling staff members as they coordinate with referral sources and process patients. Next, pair the new hire with technicians and other clinicians to watch actual procedures and learn more about the procedures themselves as well as the patients' experiences. The final step involves learning from the radiologist as she reads and interprets results and interacts with staff and patients. Be sure the new hire observes how feedback is provided to the referral source after the procedure is complete.

3. **Define product benefits.**
During product exposure, the salesperson should listen and ask service line staff members questions, with a focus on gathering information that demonstrates value to the referring physician or patient. The new employee needs to be able to position the benefits of the service line's offerings as a solution to a physician or patient need. This learning process creates a dialogue and trust between the service line team and the sales representative.

Training action: After meeting with key leaders as described in the first step, the salesperson should meet with clinical staff such as nurses, therapists, or technicians. Have them help identify the features of a particular service and how it delivers different or better benefits to both the physician and the patient. Use this group's depth of knowledge to dig below the surface and articulate a benefits statement to describe those features. (See sidebar for an example.)

4. **Provide sales training.**
Formal training in the sales cycle, customer types, and customer management is important even when the new hire has sales experience. Classroom training should cover prospecting, asking good questions, identifying the customer's needs, closing, managing objections, and retaining customers. Messaging and scripting can be reviewed to ensure consistency among members of the sales team. Employees should complete this training with a plan of how to set goals, who to target, how to get in the door, what to do after they've gotten in, how to differentiate solutions to the customer, how to respond to concerns, how to close the sale, and how to foster an ongoing relationship.

Training action: Even though all the training should be put to use immediately, reinforce what's been taught by singling out one aspect at a time. For example, in the first 30 days focus on asking good questions. Have employees share specific examples of what is and what isn't working. For the next 30 days, have the team focus on overcoming physician objections. This exercise puts responsibility on the staff to respond to the training and take ownership of applying it in the field.

5. **Embrace ongoing training.**
Training shouldn't stop when product and sales instruction is complete. Make ongoing training a priority for the sales function to help staff members learn from one another as they share field experiences, new selling techniques, and product

updates. By sharing best practices, the team doesn't waste valuable time reinventing the wheel with every sales call.

Training action: Set aside time in your monthly staff meeting for sales training. Ask a different team member to lead the group by introducing a real situation and role-playing different solutions to the problem. Use group discussions to evaluate the situation and craft a response. The individual team member enhances his presentation skills while the group benefits from new knowledge and skill development.

Digging for Details Pays off

The hole
Your hospital and a competing facility across town each have a certified stroke program.

The dig
Talk to the clinical staff to understand what makes your hospital's program better. In one case, the "better" feature was a different patient care map. In this map, clinicians started training stroke patients on the swallow reflex sooner than the competition. Patients learned to swallow sooner so that when they were discharged they were on solid foods. Meanwhile, many patients in the competition's program were being discharged with feeding tubes or to a transitional facility.

The payoff
Bringing clinical team members who really know the product or service together to help the marketing person get below the surface will uncover differentiation details that pay off. Another way to get those details is by attending monthly collaborative team meetings where outcomes, quality, and services are discussed. Listen to staff language, successes, and challenges. Attendance gives you face time with staff members, enhances your credibility by showing that you are interested in what they do, and allows you to pick up on points of differentiation so that you can translate them into "what's in it for you" statements for your targeted physicians.

6. **Observe actual performance in the field.**
   Sales reports show activity and contacts, but how do you know the individual is doing the right things in the field? Don't let new sales representatives go into the field prematurely. Instead, take the time to gauge their readiness both in product knowledge and sales skills. A manager, peer, or external coach can observe field performance and provide feedback. Without that review, it's hard for a sales representative to understand the areas that require improvement. Field observations also provide the manager with insight into customer and

marketplace issues, gaps in the sales presentation, and sales responsibilities or skills needed in the future.

Training action: Accompany sales representatives on calls to a loyal physician as well as a more challenging one to observe their ability to adjust their approach based on the customer's need. Watch and listen for how sales representatives develop a sincere dialogue to better understand the customer's needs, wants, and desires and for how they provide a differentiated solution. Use a score card on key skills and phases of the selling cycle to quantify their capabilities and areas for improvement.

7. **Let salespeople sell.**
   Make sure the infrastructure is in place to support sales efforts. This step includes identifying who will manage service complaints and issues. Sales representatives identify issues, not resolve them. Their focus is on direct marketing, volume growth, and revenue generation.

   Training action: Establish a plan with the operations team about how issues will be resolved and how the sales team will communicate back to physicians. Develop a system to track and report customer-specific complaints and issues. Let the salespeople stay focused on their goals while the operations team manages product delivery, issues resolution, and customer satisfaction.

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