

Sales Training: Effective or a Waste of Time and Money?

Since healthcare is dominated by clinical operations and profit margins are getting narrower every day, it is increasingly important to invest in professional sales training to grow your business. The services you provide to employers, consumers and physicians are intangible and similar to other healthcare providers. To be successful, you must face the very real challenge of establishing and differentiating the value and benefits of your services and your organization. Your sales staff's ability to meet this challenge is critical to your organization's future.

What's the Difference?

The style of training you choose doesn't matter. Training can be formal or informal, one-on-one or in a group. Giving your people what they need to know – real world information – that they can apply directly and immediately, does make a difference.

Your training program should encompass selling skills, product information and negotiation expertise as well as company and industry knowledge. The trainer should not only teach your sales team how to bring customers in the door, but also illustrate how to keep them and increase their business.

Who to Train

To present a consistent message to your target markets, consider providing sales training for all of your organizations sales staff including those that build business with physicians, employers, consumers and payers. This group may include:

- Account Executives
- Business Development Representatives
- Physician Liaisons
- Customer Service Representatives
- Program Managers
- Sales Managers
- Service Line Directors

Companies that have included operations/clinical staff in their sales training have found success in customer retention. Therefore, invite Program Managers and Service Line Directors to the sales training. During training break into teams, allow the sales and operations/clinical staff to work together on common problems and develop joint solutions. This enables them to better understand each other's roles. Such exercises help them to become more productive and result in greater ownership and spirit of cooperation. And the operations/clinical staff may also discover that some of your services will need to be restructured in order to be more "marketable" and to better meet the customer's needs.

What to Cover

Sales training should be customized to your services – focused on understanding the customer's

needs and demonstrating your organization's ability to meet them. Training should cover such areas as sales planning, prospecting, understanding buyer needs and positioning your services as a benefit-driven solution to these needs. Discussion should also include managing the buyer's objections and closing the sale. Role-playing and scripting are an important part of training because they give your sales staff a chance to try out the newly learned skills. Your staff should walk away from sales training with the knowledge needed to build long-term relationships with your customers.

Selecting the Trainer

Your trainer must know how to sell and help your staff communicate a consistent message about your organization's benefits as they build relationships with customers. For this reason, trainers should not only have a sales background and an ability to communicate their expertise, but also an intimate knowledge of your services.

To have credibility with your sales team, the trainer must know how to work with customers and use relevant stories from his or her experience which prove they understand the sales process as well as what you have to offer. The trainer should encourage participation of all attending and allow questions to be asked and answered.

Research your trainer options. Who can collaborate best with your sales team and management to respond to your needs? Who has a solid understanding of your sales process? Good trainers should be able to effectively deliver several hours of important content to your sales team. They should be dynamic, exciting and “into” your products and services. It comes down to personality, experience and the ability to convey relevant material.

Talk to other healthcare organizations that have used the trainer you are considering. Ask questions related to training program content, staff response, the trainers ability to translate training into real world use, return on investment and ongoing support.

The Manager as Trainer

As a manager, you can play a key role in educating your sales team. Even though you spend much of your time managing staff and mapping out strategies, always take time to sell. The most effective managers spend time in the field with their sales team. Ride along with them at least a few half-days each month. It is an excellent way to coach them and determine where they need additional training and skill development.

Provide ongoing education. If you employ an experienced sales staff, implement a mentoring program that pairs new sales team members with successful, experienced members of your team. If you have a very limited number of sales staff, hire a professional sales trainer to provide ongoing support to your team. This support can be in the form of weekly telephone meetings to answer questions, review materials, continue role-playing or further develop strategy. This may also take the form of face-to-face, one-on-one field training.

The Bottom Line

Your sales staff should present a consistent message about your organization to whomever they are talking to: employers, physicians, consumers or payers. Carefully selected and executed training for the entire sales staff is the best way to ensure this happens.

