



DEVELOPING A SALES ACADEMY

There are significant advantages to providing your own sales training but it takes time, talent and money, say **W Roy Whitten** and **Scott A Roy**



Increasingly, clients are asking for help in learning how to train their own salespeople. They express a common frustration: “We’ve put our people through all kinds of sales training, and none of it seems to ‘stick’. We spend a lot of money and, a year later, we’re doing it all over again with a different supplier.”

There are clear and understandable reasons for this phenomenon. Let’s look at the obvious and significant advantages to having your own training staff.

- ▶ **Cost savings** – the investment required to find, contract with, evaluate and eventually change sales consulting suppliers can be an expensive gift that keeps on giving.
- ▶ **Resources on site** – having an internal ‘go-to’ team to refresh, trouble-shoot, and induct new sales staff can generate a nimble, effective response to the need for sales improvement.
- ▶ Articulating ‘your way’ of selling – perhaps the greatest benefit is that developing a sustainable sales academy requires you to understand your own selling process and the skills needed to follow it.
- ▶ **Understanding and removing organisational blocks to sales success** – having the same team working with salespeople and their managers can, over time, generate slow and steady systemic improvement throughout the organisation.

There are also significant challenges to be faced. We learnt this the hard way a few years ago when we suddenly needed to teach our own consultants to sell our services.

Why we took the plunge

Briefly, here’s the story of our own sales academy. When we started our company in 2009, we never considered the possibility of training our own salespeople. We were the sales staff – the two of us. We loved selling, we were good at it and, frankly, we’d had enough of running large organisations. Our aim was to create a boutique, effective and personally fulfilling business.

For several years, this approach worked well. Requests for our services multiplied, and we had a decision to make: scale up or put on the brakes. We chose the former path, but it

came at a price. The time invested in training other consultants to deliver our services was time taken away from selling our services. Our developing work continued to grow but, when our largest commercial client chose a sales training path that we were not willing to support, we suddenly had a huge hole in our pipeline.

That’s when we decided to develop our own sales academy. On paper, it was a great idea, promising all the advantages mentioned above. Additionally, since we were in the sales training business, we had a head start. We understood our sales process. We knew the skills it required, and we knew how to train people to acquire



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new skills. And, we had a team of passionate, talented people already participating in our own academy learning how to deliver our services.

What we learnt

It was exciting. It also was exhausting, exasperating and expensive. The results have been worth it, but we had a lot to learn along the way. Here are the key lessons and what they required of us to make our sales academy work.

Lesson 1: diagnose the problem before you design the solution

Several times, we had to stop designing the sales academy and return to asking these questions: *What’s the problem we’re trying to solve? How did this problem develop? How come we haven’t solved it before now?*

We had to get outside our perspective to understand the sales problems our perspective had created. We asked our own people, our clients and other colleagues to provide insight into what happened when we sold well and when we didn’t.

We diagnosed our sales problems by asking three fundamental questions: what changes in *attitude*



were needed, what *competence* was required to sell our services consistently and well; and what *processes or systems* needed to be developed (or eliminated!) to execute our sales in a disciplined and effective manner.

Lesson 2: develop your way of selling to your customers

There are different kinds of selling. Ours is a 'complex' sale, B2B with a sales cycle of two to eight months. Other companies have 'transactional' sales, B2C with an immediate close or a very short sales cycle. Some businesses have both kinds of sales. It took time to develop the fundamentals of our selling process:

- ▶ A context for selling that frees your salespeople to be honest, direct and willing to walk away when necessary – we found that we were most successful when the purpose of our sales conversation was to develop what we call the DQ – the decision intelligence – of our customers, instead of trying to get them to sign a contract.
- ▶ A 'map' of your customer's buying process – it took time, but we identified a buying framework: the steps our customers needed to take to develop their DQ so they could make an informed buying decision.
- ▶ Aligning your selling process with this buying process – successful selling is leading your customer through the steps required for them to make their best, informed buying decision. Now, you can define the skills it takes to do this well.
- ▶ A CRM that's used for planning sales activity instead of reporting it – CRMs usually contain information that is at best outdated and at worst fabricated. We turned our CRM into a sales planning tool by replacing its 'sales' stages with the 'customer buying process' stages. We now know at a glance how far along a sale actually is and the very next step our salesperson is taking to move it forward.

Lesson 3: transform selling behaviour

We knew well Neil Rackham's summary of his research:¹ *87 per cent of classroom learning is lost within the first 30 days.* We also knew that effective sales training is caught, not taught. Lectures, online self-learning via video or text, reading – these

modalities can work well with technical, financial, software or legal training, but sales just can't be taught like this.

We explored our own experience, and we concluded that people develop selling skills over time according to a five-stage process. For each skill, they:

Learn it – this can be taught in a classroom setting. People comprehend the skill, role-play it, and articulate it. We do this face-to-face, in person and remotely via video conference.

Live it – participants form 'learning partnerships' in which they help each other practice the skills in real life, slowly experiencing their value. This is similar to the experience one has learning to ride a bicycle, in which the 'learning' happens to you experientially. It's obvious when people reach this stage, because they have stories to tell about how the skills have worked for them.

Coach it – the experience of applying skills to one's professional life creates the ability to help others have a similar experience. We call this 'coaching'. It could also be called mentoring. This is nearly always a one-on-one experience, and it often requires the person being coached to have been introduced to the skill in a face-to-face training experience.

Train it – the ability to train others from scratch is a step beyond coaching. This required skills in providing a group with an experience that changes them. It



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was at this stage of development that we found people who could start teaching with us in the academy.

Train others to train it – the final stage of development is the emergence of the capacity to 'train the trainer.' We found that this is the level of development required to train faculty for our academy.

We developed our training approach around these levels. We will do anything and everything to get people from one level to another. Often, academy



participants themselves know what they need in order to advance, and we work hard to listen to them and do what it takes to give them that opportunity.

It takes time, but we're finding – just like that bicycle-riding metaphor – that once they've made it to a level, they've 'got' the learning: they may occasionally forget to apply a skill, but they never lose the ability to do it.

Lesson 4: enrol the right people

Just because people think they can sell doesn't mean they can. We decided on criteria for participation and we enrolled participants accordingly. Our particular criteria included: viewing one's professional history as an experience in selling, being passionate about solving problems, curiosity, a capacity for deep listening, authenticity and a desire to let go of the old and learn something new.

Lesson 5: training is 10 per cent classroom, 90 per cent field

We were astounded at how long it took our talented people to apply new selling skills in the field. We think it's because nearly everyone we've worked with thinks selling is pitching. Watch



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People can know they should act differently, but put them in a selling situation, with customers demanding a demonstration, a case study, a proposal, a quote, and the tendency to revert to pitching is overwhelming, especially if they are anxious. So, lots of real-time coaching and support is needed.

Lesson 6: invest the time, talent and money

You'll need to invest in all three:

Time – invest a lot of time leading sales conversations while others observe, and then coach them as they step up to try it themselves.

Talent – hire staff to help train, coach, monitor and plan new modes of teaching. We've not repeated our clients' mistake of asking salespeople to coach or teach in addition to their day job, but this has taken, yes ...

Money – in addition to funding academy faculty, we've invested in compensation, referral bonuses and sales commissions that are generous enough to attract the commitment required for success.

Lesson 7: be watchful, flexible, willing to fail ... and don't quit!

This seems obvious, but it's hard to do when mistakes are made, progress is slow, and money is hard to come by. You're an L&D and HR professional – you know this will happen. We had a firm commitment to stick with this project, and this resolve was tested by circumstances.

The key learning here is that surprises will emerge: not just problems but their solutions as well.

Questions to ask before setting up a sales academy

Two years in, we can say with confidence that this is working. We have referrals, people selling, and a pipeline that is solid and growing. We encourage companies to explore developing their own sales academy; we also encourage them to ask five questions before doing so:

1. How will we develop a penetrating understanding of the problems we think a sales academy will solve?
2. How will we develop a clear understanding of our own, successful, selling process?

3. What skills and practices must our salespeople acquire to lead our selling process?
4. What changes in sales management, systems and processes are needed in order for our academy to flourish?
5. What investment of time, talent and money will it take for this to work?

Your answers to these questions will help shape your approach to training your salespeople. Whether you do it yourself, outsource it, or create some sort of unique hybrid that serves your needs, we encourage you to embrace the challenge. Your sales staff deserve, and actually require, your best efforts in this regard. **TJ**

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Reference

- 1 Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson, *The Challenger Sale*, Portfolio Penguin, 2011