THE BROOKS GROUP

Sales Training in a Pandemic?

5 Keys to Virtual Training Success

The sales universe has been rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic. A once-robust economy – cruising down Easy Street like a well-oiled machine -- has, in the span of several months, suddenly ceased, been overhauled, and then restarted down the road, sputtering along the way.

Likely all that your sales professionals have learned, prepared for, and taken for granted has, too, been thrown asunder. The tried and true has now been replaced with the untested and new – and with this phase shift comes an imminent, if not emergent, need to upskill your sales pros to ensure they're equal to the challenge.

A virtual sales training program – like a seasoned mechanic – can provide the insights, experiences, and grit and determination to help your sales machinery match the cadence of today's dynamic sales cycle. And, it is likely, if you are reading this, you have already concurred that some outside counsel is what's needed to redraw the playbook and get your team back on track.

But choosing and implementing a virtual sales training program can be fraught with challenges, if you try to obtain the resource without the proper preparation and insights. Over the years, we at The Brooks Group have seen sales training initiatives fail due a variety of pitfalls. These include:

1. Failing to attain the full support of the executive suite
2. Failing to secure adequate funding for the sales training initiative
3. Failing to solicit the opinions and ideas of members of the sales team about sales training
4. Failing to include the sales management team in the training initiative
5. Failing to incorporate ongoing reinforcement and follow-up to cement and measure the impact of the sales training

In an effort to help you avoid these pitfalls, we have created this guidebook. It is our hope that by being keenly aware of the above-mentioned pitfalls, you'll avoid falling victim to the mistakes that others have made.

FIRST, WHAT IS SALES TRAINING?

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of what to avoid and how to succeed, let's settle on a definition of "sales training." Traditionally, sales training has been synonymous with product training. In fact, research by Professors Christine Galea and Carl Wiens revealed that 40 percent of sales training is focused on developing product knowledge. Additional research by Professor Alfred Pelham published in the Journal of Personal Selling and Major Account Management revealed that

a mere 10 percent addresses questioning and listening skills - both of which are essential ingredients in a recipe for sales success.

Simply put, product knowledge alone is not sufficient. To be successful in a selling environment that has been transformed forever by a once-in-a-lifetime event, salespeople must become keenly aware of how their product addresses the specific needs and wants of their customers (Oh, and it won't hurt to be in sharp command of Zoom, Teams, and other virtual sales tools).

Certainly, an understanding of product is important, but the only way to truly understand how to properly apply any product or solution to a customer's needs is by first asking the right questions and then listening to a prospect's responses. These are two skills addressed by sales training that teaches salespeople how to

be customer-focused advisors, rather than product "pitch people." Importantly, whatever training you do must mesh with your existing culture — and avoiding these pitfalls will ensure that occurs.

Here are the five stumbling blocks to effective virtual sales training and how to address them:

1: Failing to attain the full support of the executive suite

Complete buy-in by top management is not only required, but absolutely essential. Sales is the "lifeblood" of any company.

CLEARLY, TOP MANAGEMENT MUST UNDERSTAND HOW CRITICAL TRAINING AND UPSKILLING IS TO THE SUCCESS OF THEIR COMPANY TODAY.

However, executives tend to side with the department or arm from which they came. In other words, a CEO with an engineering background will tend to believe that engineering is the most important side of the house. Another, with a financial background, will see that function as being the most essential.

By the same logic, an organization led by executives with a sales background will seem to advantage the sales department. In many cases, that leader can be persuaded about the importance of the sales function more readily than some others. However, another potential problem arises with these leaders — these executives may not support sales training efforts if they sold many years ago and have 'old school' views of what selling is all about. Or worse, if they were 'naturals' who were gifted at sales and can't understand why someone would need to be

trained to do something 'so easy.'

EACH EXECUTIVE MUST BE 'SOLD' ON THE VALUE OF SALES TRAINING.

2: Failing to secure adequate funding for the virtual sales training initiative

Virtual sales training is not something that can (in most every case) be done without help. Unfortunately, many organizations will attempt to 'train-on-the-cheap.' They will develop a sales training program on their own or expect their entire enterprise team to be transformed by attending a brief webinar. Rarely do either of these approaches work.

IN MOST CASES, EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL SALES TRAINING INVOLVES A TOTAL CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION.

That is a painful realization for many penny-pinchers, particularly during times when every resource is being closely scrutinized. But, it is simply not possible to develop an organizational transformation without a significant investment. The other side of the coin is more comforting. According to both anecdotal and hard-data evidence, virtual sales training - when properly launched, implemented, and followed-up on - has significant impact on the bottom line. When adequately funded, the impact more than covers any up-front cost.

In short, if it's done wrong, your virtual sales training investment will be the most expensive mistake you've ever made. If done properly, however, it will be the best thing you've ever done.

Buy-in from the sales department can also come when they are involved in the early development of the training program. Put another way, it is important for salespeople to have more to do with the program than simply "showing up" to be taught.

An important aspect of soliciting the opinions and ideas of the sales team requires maximizing their training time. For most salespeople, this means seeing just how much it can do for their individual incomes or sales numbers, in whatever way those numbers are calculated.

This is a very real concern for salespeople because the only real inventory a salesperson has is time. It's absolutely essential that every second of sales training time be maximized and provide measurable results. And, with COVID giving rise to a new generation of virtual and spaced learning options, training can be delivered in more dynamic and digestible chunks — allowing for sales training results to be measured on the fly.

THE BOTTOM LINE IS THIS: EVERY MOMENT SALESPEOPLE SPEND DOING SOMETHING OTHER THAN SELLING MUST, IN SOME WAY, HELP THEM SELL BETTER.

3: Failing to solicit the opinions and ideas of members of the sales team about virtual sales training

Just as top executives must understand the importance of sales training, salespeople must also be shown how important it is. Human beings, by their very nature, resist change. Homeostasis or balance is the goal. And change is not about balance. A complete cultural transformation is not easy and will require some significant adjustment for individuals, departments, and the organization as a whole.

As a result of all of this change, salespeople must see just how much the virtual sales training can benefit not only their organization, but also their individual incomes and sales numbers.

4: Failing to include the sales management team in the training initiative

Too often we see virtual sales training initiatives fail because organizations believe that they'll see positive changes simply by training the salespeople. In fact, it is essential to train their managers right alongside them. In other words, an important component of the virtual sales training effort must be geared toward

the unique requirements of the sales management team.

If a sales team learns a new principle, and the sales management team is not made aware of how to coach or develop their team around that new principle, it will not have its full benefit.

Let's consider the fictitious (but highly representative) sales team at an organization we'll call XYZ Industries. Let's say those salespeople participate in a virtual sales training program in which they learn a new sales process. Let's further say that it is a questions-based, linked, sequential process that has been proven to improve closing ratios by more than 50 percent. Let's make the additional statement that their management team is not given a sales-management-specific version of training in the process.

The questions we can pose are relatively clear: How can they manage the process? How can they coach within the process? How will they bring new hires up to speed quickly within the framework of the process?

CLEARLY, TRAINING SALES MANAGERS IS AN ESSENTIAL DRIVER OF THE ONGOING SUCCESS OF ANY TRAINING INITIATIVE. AFTER ALL, THEY WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONTINUITY OF WHATEVER IS TAUGHT IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM.

5: Failing to incorporate ongoing reinforcement and follow-up to cement and measure the impact of the sales training

Training can't stop at the classroom door — it must be reinforced in the field. Research clearly shows that sales training that includes additional follow-up and

reinforcement components is far more effective than training that occurs in a vacuum. As evidence of this phenomenon, Gartner research found that B2B sales reps forget 70 percent of the information they learn within a week of training, and 87 percent will forget it within a month.

More contemporary virtual sales training programs – like the BrooksOS spaced training program – evolve weekly over the course of six months. This allows for ongoing reinforcement that emphasizes the most impactful and meaningful elements of training initiatives. Such an approach allows the training facilitator to incorporate lessons into the training that are culled directly from the sales team's own evolving selling environment.

Also, by structuring virtual training in this manner, participants have an opportunity to apply knowledge between sessions, which improves retention.

This "spacing effect" links retention to repeated exposure to information. Studies show that by using spaced retention, we remember about 80 percent of what we learn beyond 60 days.

In short, we believe that virtual training will inevitably fail if it is simply a one-time event. Common sense (and decades of research) leave no doubt that changes in behavior – and their underlying attitudes – occur over time

A SALES-DRIVEN ORGANIZATION THAT HOPES TO SEE LASTING BENEFIT FROM ANY SALES TRAINING INITIATIVE WILL ENSURE THAT WHAT IS TAUGHT IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM IS REINFORCED.

Conclusion

To be effective, virtual sales training programs must avoid the five pitfalls and be seamlessly integrated into the unique environment in which they're being deployed. Successfully training a sales team is no easy task, and a program cannot be developed in a vacuum. It is essential to find a strategic partner to advise and assist in the development of any effective virtual sales training program.
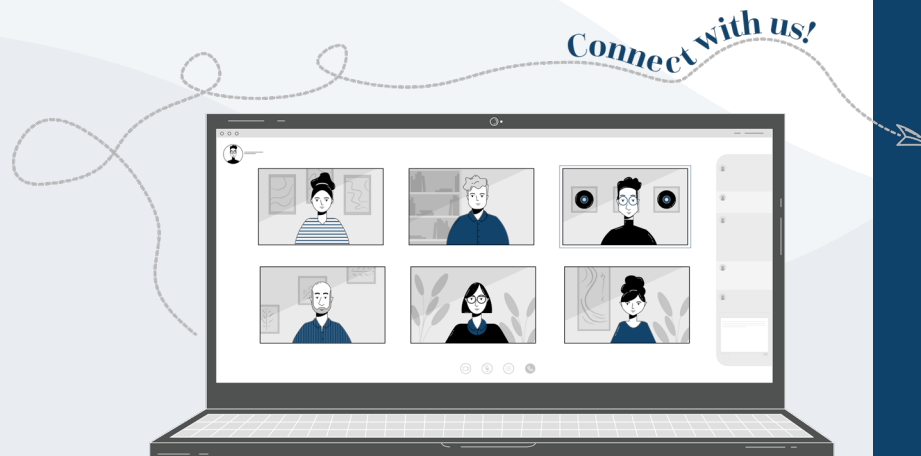
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Founded in 1977, The Brooks Group is an award-winning B2B sales training company focused on bringing practical, straightforward solutions to your sales force selection and training challenges.

The Brooks Group provides a suite of proven sales and sales management development programs, industry-leading reinforcement tools, and best in class assessments.

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