



Field Training

Frustrated by declining sales and ongoing uncertainty, many executives wonder how they can get their salespeople to perform better. The answer: coaching. By Rick Davis



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Many managers feel they should be able to rely on the skills of their salespeople and devote little time to coaching in the field. But whether you are a full-time sales manager or a branch manager saddled with sales leadership responsibility, you must find time to get to the field with your salespeople. These tough times practically demand it.

Bill, a regional manager for a New Jersey dealer, had not traveled with his salespeople in many years. After learning of a powerful method for improving communications with customers and prospects, he decided to hit the road with one of his sales reps.

The person Bill traveled with was eager to learn, but she wasn't a good listener. Bill discovered that this salesperson never prepared questions to ask clients and prospects during sales meetings. So, during lunch, Bill told her what he wanted when a salesperson called on him as a customer. Bill noted that he greatly appreciated salespeople who took the time to understand his branch activities and marketing philosophy. He told his salesperson she

should strive to do the same.

After lunch, she took Bill to an appointment, where Bill demonstrated how to learn about the customer's business practices. The focus of the meetings included questions about the economy and the challenges the customer faced. One customer actually said: "It is quite refreshing to have someone come to my office and listen to my problems, rather than try to push more product on me."

The result was that Bill and his salesperson made a sale for a new product line to the client that day.

After that meeting, Bill became an observer, watching during sales calls as the salesperson worked on her questioning and listening skills. They discussed questioning techniques in the car. At the end of the day,

Bill laid out the questioning skills he expected from his salespeople.

When he traveled again with this salesperson, there was noticeable improvement in her questioning. Bill could move on to develop new skills in his pupil.

If you want to succeed as a sales leader, you have to coach. Begin by doing this:

1. Plan time to travel with your salespeople. Many managers feel it is better to surprise their salespeople, finding out what a "real" day of sales looks like. Besides being unfair to the salesperson, who may have administrative tasks planned for the day, it is a poor use

of the manager's time. Schedule time when you know you can make ample sales calls that provide real opportunities to observe sales skills in action.

2. Manage normalcy. When the manager travels with the salesperson, the largest and most valuable customers will expect the manager to play a crucial role in the sales call. Thus, a day of sales coaching should include calls to "average" accounts, where the salesperson can run the meeting and provide opportunities for the manager to merely observe performance.

3. Break a few eggs. When things go badly, the typical response for a manager is to jump in and save the day. Avoid this temptation. After the meeting, the salesperson will realize that things didn't go well, and a solid opportunity for constructive feedback is thus revealed.

4. Make feedback specific to behaviors. At some point, the manager should have a private conversation with the sales rep to offer constructive feedback. Focus on behaviors rather than results. When the behaviors are right, the results will take care of themselves. ■