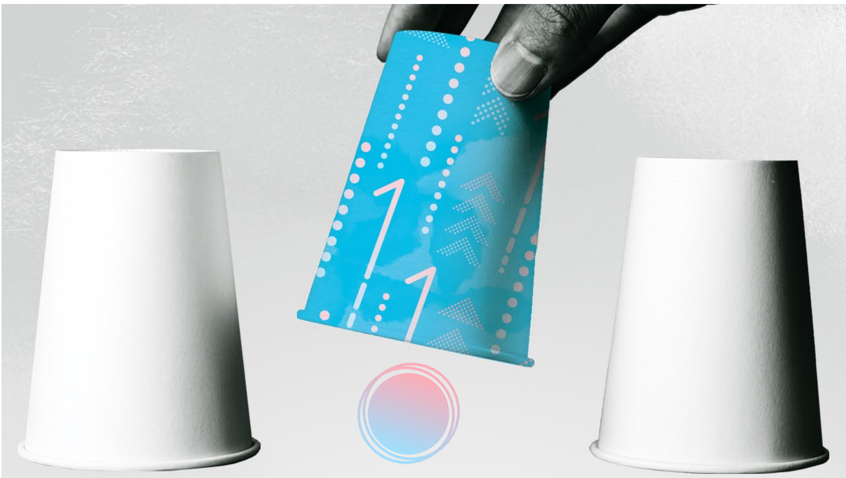

Don't Just Trust Your Gut: 3 Data-driven Strategies for World-class Sales Training

By Amy Franko

Learning leaders who focus on sales training have a unique and interesting challenge: Your training team's contributions must directly impact revenue generation and sales growth in your firm.

Because smart sales growth is the engine of your organization's success, your training teams need to be as well-versed as the sales teams in the "business of your business." Training teams also need to know the "business of your customers," as it relates to how sales teams sell your products and solutions. Your sales teams need to view your sales training team as a peer and partner in their success.

One of the keys to create this "team of peers" to the sales organization is to leverage the right data to design, implement and refine your sales training programs. This includes:

- Understanding trends driving how your sales teams are identifying and winning business.
- Using sales-specific assessments to know your sales teams' strengths and weaknesses.
- Aligning with your organization's critical sales metrics to determine which training content and methods will contribute to accomplishing those metrics.

1. Know the Business of Your Business

What current trends are impacting your sales training strategy?

There is no shortage of information on trends; as a training leader, your role becomes deciding which trends truly impact sales training programs and which trends are considered noise. Below are several trends that sales training leaders want to keep a sharp focus on:

- Customer interactions are evolving. The way your customers want to interact with your sales teams has changed. According to McKinsey, between 70-80% of buyers prefer remote engagement over in-person engagement. The pandemic has taught us that we can and should bolster our ability to interface digitally with customers. There is a balance to strike. Complex conversations and decision-making often need in-person interface; your skill development programs should help sellers to determine the best sales conversation method and the content of those conversations.

SMART SALES GROWTH IS THE ENGINE OF YOUR ORGANIZATION'S SUCCESS.

- Leaders are focused on a balance of revenue sources and significant pipeline improvements. Gartner's "The Chief Sales Officer" has uncovered that chief sales officers are expecting approximately 70% of revenues to come from existing client growth and approximately 30% to come from new client acquisition. Those leaders are also highly focused on improving the quality of their sales pipelines. This indicates that sales training programs need to address both the skills of client expansion and prospecting for new client acquisition.
- Enter elevated sales conversations. According to Forrester, decision-makers are more likely to buy from sales professionals who educate them with new insights and perspectives. Sales training programs that follow a pain/feature/benefit/solution approach are outdated because they often neglect the need for thought-provoking insights. Customers expect their valuable time (and the valuable time of your sales teams) to focus on new insights, perspectives and education that they can't obtain elsewhere.

Each of the above trends indicates a skill you can assess for within your sales teams. When you have the skill data, you can more easily identify the training approaches to best address skill gaps.

2. Uncover Relevant Skill Competency Data with Sales-specific Assessments

There's a significant gap in most organizations between the current state of sales performance and the desired state of sales performance. How can training leaders partner with sales leaders to ensure the right sales professionals are in the right roles, with the right skills?

There's a multifaceted answer to that question. From a strategic standpoint, taking a center of excellence approach is one to consider. This approach includes building excellence in the pillars of people, structure and clients.

- **People:** The people pillar includes talent strategy, such as hiring, onboarding, assessment, skill development and leadership development.
- **Structure:** The structure pillar includes your sales processes, organizational design, role alignment, compensation models and other sales tools necessary to succeed.
- **Client:** The client pillar includes your approach to new business, client expansion, account management and business partner development.

Within the people pillar, leveraging a sales-specific assessment is the path to mining the right data on the modern sales competencies your teams need. In many instances, sales leaders overestimate their teams' skills, sales professionals are mismatched to their roles and aren't maximizing their potential or there are insufficient structures to support the sales team. For example, if you require a sales professional to sell into a brand-new market or territory, that's considered to be a hunting role with high levels of difficulty. If you have a professional in that role who is better suited for existing client expansion, that mismatch will cause challenges in achieving sales results.

Given the trends shared earlier and the current sales environment, gather data in the following competencies:

- Opportunity creation through hunting and prospecting skills.
- Qualification of opportunities to ensure a quality pipeline with velocity through the process.
- Access to executive decision-makers and stakeholders.
- Consultative sales conversations held digitally and in-person, which continually add value to a client's or prospect's business.
- Ability to sell on value rather than price.
- Digital competencies, including video proficiency.
- Use of process in their sales approach.

You can and should measure mindset, sales competencies and the structures of your sales organization. You can also measure how well the sales team is suited to both the type of sales role and sales role difficulty. These measurements can guide sales training strategy, skill focus and application with customer opportunities.

3. Align With and Recommend Substantive Sales Metrics

There are varying degrees of maturity when it comes to the sales metrics tracked within organizations. Training leaders can improve their "peer status" with sales leaders by requesting to collaborate on the metrics conversation. Offer your recommendations on metrics based on interactions within the business and assessment data. Then demonstrate where your training helps to improve metrics to further enhance your credibility.

As a training leader, what are metrics you can recommend?

- **Financial metrics:** Financial metrics track revenue performance, profitability levels, average order size or account size and overall goal attainment. Financial metrics can be validated through your training by requesting sales teams to submit opportunities on which they will practice the skills learned. Using assessment data on the competencies of opportunity qualification and selling on value will assist in identifying current and future sales team performance.

- **Account metrics:** Account metrics track progress in key accounts and target opportunities. This can be expanded to include both new and follow-up meetings with those key accounts and opportunities. Using assessment data on the competencies of how well your sales teams access decision-makers and lead quality sales conversations will provide you with a path to improve these metrics.

- **Pipeline metrics:** Pipeline metrics can include team or individual win percentages, overall pipeline quality and overall sales cycle length. Sales leaders will welcome your focus on pipeline improvement because it's an indicator of forecasting accuracy and the overall health of the sales organization.

- **Professional development metrics:** These metrics can include reporting on sales competency strengths and gaps, as well as action plans. Sales professionals want to envision their future career path, whether that is expanding their current role, having opportunities to move laterally into other sales functions or pursuing a leadership path. Sales organizations, being focused on other key metrics, don't always focus on these areas — and this is where the training function can provide additional value.

Combine Your Data Sources to Produce World-class Sales Training

Using a sales-specific assessment, combined with trends knowledge and your pertinent metrics, you will be in the credible position of making training recommendation rooted in science. Below are additional ways to combine these various data sources to ensure they are captured in your sales training programs:

- Ensure your training teams are well-versed in your organization's overall strategy and sales strategy. Any requests for sales training content or programs can be aligned or disqualified based on potential impact on those strategies.

- Select and implement a sales-specific skill assessment for sales professionals and sales leaders that measures mindset, sales competencies and sales structures. The science will support your recommendations relative to skill development and sales organization strategy.

- Integrate coaching for both sales professionals and sales leaders on how to interpret and use assessment data. You may invest additional time with sales leaders on interpreting and applying the data for their teams.

- Add a component to your sales training programs where sales professionals identify valid opportunities to work with during those programs. Those opportunities can be loaded into your customer relationship management (CRM) platform, tagged for your program and tracked to your identified metrics.

- Identify sales professionals and leaders who are engaged in and actively using assessment data; they can champion usage across your organization and conduct learning sessions for their peers.

Whether your training team is new to this journey or you have various data practices implemented, begin by assigning training team members to research and report on trends, assessment options and relevant metrics. This research can form the basis of your data-driven strategy for greater success.

Amy Franko is the leading sales strategist for growth-oriented, mid-market organizations. Her book, "The Modern Seller," is an Amazon best-seller and she is also recognized by LinkedIn as a Top Sales Voice. Email Amy.