



The Sales Training Illusion

Discover why sales training often fails, why managers can be the cause, and how to achieve positive change in your team.

Too often sales training provided for professionals and technical staff doesn't really 'stick'. You don't see the upswing in capability you were hoping for. Why does that happen? Frequently it's because management and participants unintentionally sabotage the outcome.

This report reveals 5 internal causes (and 15 contributing factors) of sales training failure and provides a management checklist with practical suggestions for improvement.

Stuart Ayling
Chief Sales Strategist, Marketing Nous

The Sales Training Illusion

by Stuart Ayling

All Rights Reserved

Copyright © Marketing Nous

You can pass this report onto friends and colleagues. You may not sell it.

You can post parts of this report on a website as long as you give a link back to www.marketingnous.com.au/sales-training-illusion.htm (where the report can be downloaded) and credit Stuart Ayling as the author.

The information contained in this report is strictly for educational purposes. Therefore, if you wish to apply ideas contained in this report, you are taking full responsibility for your actions. The author and publisher disclaim any warranties (express or implied), merchantability, or fitness for any particular purpose. The author and publisher shall in no event be held liable to any party for any direct, indirect, punitive, special, incidental or other consequential damages arising directly or indirectly from any use of this material, which is provided “as is” and without warranties.

Who is this report for?

I have written this report to help business leaders and managers in companies that employ (what I refer to as) ‘technical specialists’, that is, staff who have a dual responsibility of delivering their technical knowledge or expertise and who also need to sell. The term ‘technical specialist’ includes anyone who has a particular area of technical or professional expertise such as engineers, consultants, scientists, technical support, product specialists, advisers, professional services and those who sell technical products.

In a general sense this information also applies to sales roles in other industry sectors and for training other than sales. However the specifics in this report address sales training for technical specialists.

Contents

Introduction	4
1. Management Not Committed to Change	6
1.1 Lack of strategic vision.	6
1.2 Absence of support for new sales behaviours.	6
1.3 No clear expectations for improvement.....	7
2. Training Not Relevant for the Team.....	8
2.1 Training doesn't address real sales situations.	8
2.2 Training doesn't capture the nature of client interactions.	8
2.3 Training doesn't cater to participants learning needs.	9
3. Staff Not Committed to Improvement.....	9
3.1 Staff don't believe it will help them personally.....	9
3.2 Staff don't understand the impact for the business.....	10
3.3 Staff are scared to adopt new behaviours and processes.....	11
4. No Sales Process or Methodology.....	11
4.1 No consistent path for sales opportunities.	11
4.2 Competitive advantage not clearly defined.	12
4.3 Lack of competitive awareness.	13
5. Vague Position Descriptions	13
5.1 Tasks and responsibilities not clearly defined.....	13
5.2 KPI's not defined, not understood, or not realistic.	14
5.3 Lack of context for selling within their broader role.....	15
Taking Action	15
Management Checklist.....	16
How Marketing Nous Can Help You Succeed	17
About the Author.....	18

Introduction

Gone are the days when technical specialists such as engineers, scientists, consultants, technical advisers, service technicians, and professional services personnel could simply 'serve' their client and wait for more business to roll in the door.

Now, new business goes to the company that is most proactive.

Selling is rarely taught during 'technical' training in any industry. However, once technical specialists advance beyond junior levels in their career, further progression often relies on their ability to generate revenue. Simply being technically skilled is no longer enough. They also need sales ability.

Many technical specialists could be described as 'doer-sellers'.

That is, they do technical work and also need to sell. Even though their selling activities may only be part-time, or ad-hoc, their company is relying on them to initiate and secure new business whenever the opportunity arises.

How do they develop the skills to do that?

Sales training is usually seen as the solution.

And it can be. Well designed and delivered sales training can give participants the knowledge, skills, understanding and confidence to successfully undertake sales discussions and win new business.

This is where The Sales Training Illusion can begin, by thinking...

"If we give them sales training they'll know what to do, and can sell more".

If only it were that easy! Sales training is not just about knowing, it's about doing. Improving sales skills requires behavioural change.

We can run sales training and have participants leave with new knowledge and increased confidence. But are we being too optimistic in expecting they will apply the knowledge, left to their own devices?

And that's the illusion.

- It looks like the team have increased capabilities
- They certainly have the information, and heightened awareness
- They may say the right things and sound like they know
- Heck, they might even set goals and plan to do things differently

However, without sufficient support and an environment to encourage ongoing skill development, the impact of the new information will fade. After a while the new information is... just information. Not action. Not new sales behaviours.

Effective sales training is a process that enables behavioural change.

Many companies approach sales training as an 'event', like they would for technical training. With technical training you can usually store the information (in a computer, on a book shelf, or in your head) and get it out when you want to use it. In some cases there's not much, if any, behavioural change required.

Within the learning and development field it is widely accepted that to maximise behavioural change a 'process' is required that extends beyond the training event to support the individual participant to adopt the desired new behaviours.

Embedding new sales behaviours requires learning, practice, review and persistence.

That's easy to say. But from an internal company perspective it is often quite difficult to provide adequate post-training support and coaching for each individual.

Too often company leaders are susceptible to The Sales Training Illusion because they:

- Treat sales training like technical training (emphasis on knowledge acquisition, not skill development)
- Have staff that work remotely, or independently, or both, which makes supporting the individual even more difficult
- Are focused on the team meeting deadlines (getting the work done)
- Don't have a specific outcome in mind from the training
- Try to be efficient by minimising training time (rather than being effective)
- Are relying on the external training provider to implement a quick-fix solution to reduce lost sales opportunities

In this report we discuss the five major internal causes of sales training failure, and identify what you can do to avoid The Sales Training Illusion.

Based on observation and feedback from working with hundreds of executives and sales training participants within client organisations the five main causes of The Sales Training Illusion are:

1. Management not committed to change
2. Training not relevant for the team
3. Staff not committed to improvement
4. No sales process or methodology
5. Vague position descriptions for sales roles

At the end of this report you will find a management checklist to help you design a productive learning environment within your organisation.

Sales training is extremely valuable. It can build sales capabilities, improve teamwork, lead to significant performance improvement, and increase revenue. The burning question is: **How can you maximise return on Investment in training by creating a system for success?** Keep reading...

1. Management Not Committed to Change

1.1 Lack of strategic vision.

In a sports team, training helps you win the game. That's the focus. It's the same in business. Training should be provided to help your team improve their skills and capabilities to win 'the game'.

Are you clear about... What is your game? What are your business goals?

Where do you want to be?

No matter what the topic or skill-set that is targeted for improvement, ideally training should support the achievement of the organisations goals. The purpose of training is to better equip participants to work towards achieving their KPI's or the objectives of their team, business unit or company.

Conducting training without the guidance of a strategic vision is like hiking without a destination. Sure, you can walk around, navigate terrain, and maybe even enjoy the experience. But how do you make effective choices if you don't know where are you heading?

1.2 Absence of support for new sales behaviours.

It's easy to run sales training and expect participants to change. But that is somewhat naïve.

It is essential to follow up and encourage participants to implement the desired sales behaviours. Sometimes the new behaviours can be quite confronting for the individual to apply, especially if they are working on their own, such as on client premises, travelling from client to client, or working independently of other staff.

This is particularly relevant for technical and professional staff who are used to operating with a more reactive, client-service mindset. In effect they are part-time sales people with their main focus being the delivery of their service or expertise. They don't get a lot of practice using their sales skills on day to day basis.

As a manager do you provide your team with the necessary coaching, support, and opportunity to practice selling?

It's easy to run sales training and expect participants to change. But that is somewhat naïve. People don't change unless they have a good reason to do so, and they have a system that supports the change.

If you were seriously planning to get fit and lose weight you would:

- Remove junk food from your house
- Create an exercise schedule, and stick to it
- Tell family and friends so they don't tempt you away from your goal
- Measure and keep track of your progress

See, that's creating a system for success.

For sales training to 'stick' your team needs a system for success, not just a one-off training event.

Please don't misunderstand the message here. Sales training is an incredibly important part of the overall performance improvement process. But training on its own (as a one-off event) quite often won't produce the quantum of change originally desired.

1.3 No clear expectations for improvement.

OK... you've run the training. Everyone is back at work. What should they expect of themselves? How often should they be practicing, or using the new skills? How will they know when they have made satisfactory progress?

Have you communicated what you expect of them?

Too often sales training is conducted and participants return to their workplace without a clear picture in their mind of:

- When they should use the new skills/techniques
- What sort of result they should expect
- How to manage when things don't go exactly as planned
- Who they can ask for support
- What success will look and feel like
- How long it will take them to become proficient

Some of these expectations can be discussed and explored during the training experience. But nothing beats the consistent communication of expectations and feedback from their manager.

Do you use performance reviews to focus attention on areas for improvement?

When managed correctly the performance review process is an ideal opportunity to address expectations for improvement. A central concept within performance reviews is to look forward, set goals and clarify responsibilities of each party (manager and team member) to take action.

Unfortunately many organisations don't follow a suitable performance review process, or at best may meet once per year – and that is often related to a salary review, not really a performance review.

Management must take steps to communicate expectations in a manner that encourages training participants to focus on specific improvements.

2. Training Not Relevant for the Team

2.1 Training doesn't address real sales situations.

Effective training helps to bridge the gap between learning and application by attaching new ideas and techniques to realistic sales situations.

Formal sales training that teaches people 'how to sell' has been around for decades, if not longer. There are many versions of 'how to sell' based on different industry sectors, types of client, and geographic location.

What works in one industry, for one company, may not work for another.

Unfortunately there are still many sales training programs that present 'standard' sales concepts, processes and techniques with the expectation that your team will adapt the theory and apply it to their own situations. This type of training is often more theoretical than realistic, and can frustrate your team by leaving them to fill the gap between the classroom concepts and their workplace experience.

Does your training focus on real-life sales situations?

Effective training helps to bridge the gap between learning and application by attaching new ideas and techniques to realistic sales situations. When relevant client-specific examples are embedded in case studies, sales simulations, and group discussion, participants leave training with:

- Greater understanding of when and how to apply the new sales behaviours
- Increased confidence to undertake sales conversations
- Practical insights into how others deal with the same situation
- Clarity on specific words, phrases, examples, and responses that are suitable to use in real-life sales conversations

2.2 Training doesn't capture the nature of client interactions.

Even within the same industry sector, the nature of the client relationship may vary from one company to the next. Competitors don't just battle each other over products and services. Of particular importance for any company that sells business-to-business services or technical products is that competitors also compete based on the quality of their client interaction.

In sales it's not just about 'what' you do, it's about 'how' you do it.

How does your team interact with decision makers? How do they make contact with prospects? How do they present the recommended solution? How do they ask for commitment? Do they use the right tone of voice; mannerisms; body language?

To maximise effectiveness and usability sales training must incorporate the culture of your organisation. It needs to blend sales best practices with an approach that works for *your* team interacting with *your* clients.

2.3 Training doesn't cater to participants learning needs.

In most technical, professional, and business development teams there is a mixture of experience and skill levels. In some cases I've seen teams with a range of 30-years between the newest and most senior team members.

Different team members will have differing learning needs.

To fully engage the entire team it is important for training to be designed and delivered in a way that:

- Encourages the experienced staff to share their expertise and insights
- Reassures newer staff they will not be embarrassed
- Draws on everyone's personal perspective to develop combined outputs
- Provides alternate learning options to suit visual, kinaesthetic and audible learning preferences
- Caters for the specific skills-gaps that exist in the team

Why would anyone change their behaviour unless they could see a clear and compelling benefit for themselves?

Various learning processes are involved in identifying and addressing these needs, such as interviewing participants and management, and observing sales activities.

It can also be helpful to use a sales-centric evaluation of aptitude and selling style in advance of the training to discover common ground for skills development. Evaluation may also identify individual requirements that are best suited to one-on-one coaching and support rather than workshop-style training

3. Staff Not Committed to Improvement

3.1 Staff don't believe it will help them personally.

Why would anyone change their behaviour unless they could see a clear and compelling benefit for themselves? When faced with change we all think, "What's in it for me?"

People are creatures of habit. And generally speaking we resist changing our behaviour unless we really, really need to. Or unless we *want* to.

Does your team *want* to change, or do they feel *pressured* to change?

Even though during training participants may agree it would be a good idea to do certain things – such as initiate contact with a prospective client or make a phone call to follow up a previous sales conversation – unless they see real benefits for them to do so they will usually find a reason to delay taking action.

To maximise stickiness and impact of sales training participants should see the training as helping them achieve their own goals, which may include:

- Feeling more confident
- Being recognised for achieving sales targets
- Advancing their personal or professional development
- Being promoted
- Increasing earnings through sales-related incentives
- Creating new opportunities for their career
- Personal pride - simply doing a good job they can be proud of

3.2 Staff don't understand the impact for the business.

Can your team see the benefits to the business from implementing the desired changes to their selling activities? Let's face it. Staff frequently attend sales training because they are instructed to be there. Often they haven't considered the impact they could be having on generating new business.

Does your team recognise the impact they can have on achieving business goals?

One of the challenges with running sales-training for non-sales people is to encourage a more proactive approach to recognising and exploring potential new business opportunities.

Many staff in professional and technical roles perceive themselves as being reactive, with their attention mainly on responding to client requests. When asked during training sessions about their current state of mind (whilst working with clients) technical specialists mention a focus on:

- Deliverables to meet client/contractual needs
- Solving technical problems and 'doing' the work
- Providing the right information in response to questions/requests
- Building relationships with clients
- Listening, understanding and fulfilling client requests

These are all important activities, but they are predominantly reactive.

To maximise impact of sales training it is necessary for participants to understand the role they play in helping achieve the company's goals. They should be excited by the opportunity to proactively contribute to the accomplishment of those outcomes.

3.3 Staff are scared to adopt new behaviours and processes.

It's no secret that change can be scary. And changing behaviours is particularly difficult. Each step forward takes courage and determination. And it's so easy to regress or delay taking action.

Particularly for technical specialists who are used to feeling as though they are the 'experts' in their field, the thought of doing something new can seem incredibly risky. After spending most of their time being the expert it's uncomfortable to feel like a novice at selling.

Adding to the sense of risk is the fact that sales behaviours are demonstrated in public, in front of clients and colleagues. You can't sell in private!

It is important to provide safe practice opportunities away from clients.

This is especially important for technical staff, professionals and managers who are not full-time sales people.

Adding to the sense of risk is the fact that sales behaviours are demonstrated in public, in front of clients and colleagues.

A full-time sales person has many opportunities to hone their sales skills every day. In contrast, technical specialists may only use their sales skills on a part-time basis (as needed), and often go for considerable periods between purposeful sales conversations.

In between these sporadic sales experiences their comfort level and recall of sales techniques and strategies will certainly diminish. Without regular use skills become stale.

It is unrealistic to expect your technical specialists to be fully confident performing their sales activities without appropriate practice to increase their comfort level, reduce the fear factor, and embed the preferred selling behaviours.

4. No Sales Process or Methodology

4.1 No consistent path for sales opportunities.

A sales process is simply a step by step path of how you work with a prospect to convert them into a client. This varies from company to company based on what is being sold, the complexity of the clients buying process (including who is involved), sales resources required, and your own criteria for qualifying prospects.

The sales process defines how to best manage sales conversations, and clarifies the desired outcome at each step. This information is invaluable to define the sales skills required for your team.

Sales training should be delivered with due recognition of what the sellers (your technical specialists) will actually be doing during the sales process.

Without a consistent sales process your team will miss opportunities.

Symptoms of a non-existent or poorly understood sales process can include:

- Loose ends during the sales process, leading to inaction and/or indecision
- Lack of communication between team members and sharing of information regarding the sales opportunity
- Lack of expectation of involvement by others, resulting in lack of cooperation between your team
- Lack of planning for particular outcomes, with staff unclear about what should happen next, or who should follow up with the client
- Sales opportunities that never close, without really understanding why
- Overlooking influential people in the clients decision making process (such as champions, users, influencers)
- A hit-or-miss approach that leaves too much to chance to win the business

4.2 Competitive advantage not clearly defined.

A key outcome of a sales discussion is to reinforce the perception that your company is best suited to serve that particular client (assuming you can deliver what they are seeking). That is, your goal is to emphasise your competitive advantage.

Without something to make your products or services 'different' your team will struggle to create a winning edge in prospects minds.

The ability to create this perception is based on your company having a competitive difference, or competitive advantage that offers a tangible benefit for the prospect. Without something to make your products or services 'different' your team will struggle to create a winning edge in prospects minds.

To win new business your sales team needs to understand your point of difference, and be fluent expressing it.

A sales process provides a structure that guides the communication of your competitive advantage through sales conversations.

Based on previous successes your sales process will indicate which benefits and competitive advantages are introduced at each step of the sales conversation.

In addition to knowing your competitive advantage your team must know how to express it in an effective manner throughout the sales engagement.

4.3 Lack of competitive awareness.

Sales never occur in a vacuum. There are always competing alternatives. Your sales methodology should take into account the competitive landscape and prepare your team to proactively manage the perceptions of prospects during sales conversations.

Managing perceptions is a subtle process that is best addressed through the use of:

- Specific examples
- Relevant terminology
- Client success stories
- Advanced communication skills.

Have you identified key competitors and prepared effective responses to their messages?

Sales training should cover more than simply the process of selling. The workshop environment is an ideal opportunity to get your team on board and develop consistency in their approach to managing competitor actions.

In particular your team needs to know how to present your company in its best light, and how to respond to comments, claims and innuendo initiated by your competitors.

5. Vague Position Descriptions

5.1 Tasks and responsibilities not clearly defined.

One of the most important functions of a Position Description (also referred to as a PD, or Job Description) is to provide a guide as to what the incumbent should be doing and what they are actually responsible for achieving.

The PD defines who the role reports to, resources available to them, and can indicate how much time should be spent on certain categories of tasks, such as “10% of time each week to be spent investigating new business opportunities”.

When it comes to their sales activities does your team clearly know what they are responsible for?

Even if a PD exists it may not be comprehensive. Many companies that have a PD for their technical, professional or service roles only focus on the technically-related tasks and responsibilities. Admittedly the technical work is usually the major focus. However if other responsibilities exist, such as initiating client contact, supporting others in sales discussions, or meeting revenue targets, sales-related tasks should be included in the PD.

Without a properly prepared PD the team member may become disoriented or frustrated when faced with a variety of tasks and deadlines, especially when there is a mix of sales tasks and technical tasks to be achieved. How should they prioritise their time? What exactly are they expected to do? A thoroughly prepared PD gives them clarity.

Conducting sales training for staff who do not see 'sales' or 'business development' or 'new business' objectives in their PD may be a waste of time. Will those staff actually implement new behaviours – with the view of winning more business – if they don't see any evidence it is their job to do so?

5.2 KPI's not defined, not understood, or not realistic.

For many technical and professional roles Key Performance Indicators may be difficult to quantify as discrete items, and so can easily be left as high-level statements or fuzzy descriptions in the PD (such as "Identify and assist with development of new market areas" or "Establish and maintain good business relationships with clients").

The KPI's also provide motivation for technical specialists to adopt the sales behaviours.

Even if KPI's are stated the team member may not understand how the KPI is measured (desired outcome), or what they should be doing to work towards achieving that KPI (how to achieve it).

KPI's must be seen as relevant, achievable and rewarding.

Ideally for roles that include sales responsibilities KPI's need to clearly state the expectations of sales activities (inputs) and/or sales results (outputs).

Examples of KPI's include:

- Number of client visits/meetings to discuss new business (input)
- Number of contacts made; prospecting (input)
- Time spent working on proposals (input)
- Number of proposals submitted (input)
- Value of sales achieved; revenue generated (output)
- Number of orders, contracts or deals completed (output)
- Number of new clients (output)
- Value of new business in the sales pipeline (output)
- Conversion rate of meeting to proposal, or proposals to orders (output)

The management maxim "What gets measured, gets attention" certainly applies here. For example if there is not a KPI for generating a stated quantity of new business it is extremely unlikely the team member will put themselves in the potentially uncomfortable position of 'selling' to the client.

Sales-related KPI's give meaning to sales training and motivates staff.

When sales-related KPI's are clearly defined sales training can be directed towards developing the skills required to achieve those KPI's.

The KPI's also provide motivation for the technical specialist to adopt the sales behaviours, rather than dismissing the training as being irrelevant with the thought "I'm not really in sales".

5.3 Lack of context for selling within their broader role.

A PD gives the team member clarity in what they should be doing and achieving in their role. It can also give context for the sales activities.

Technical and professional staff generally don't have much of a background in sales. So it's not surprising they don't always see the relevance of selling within their broader technically-oriented role.

Do you create context for selling so your team understands when, why and how to manage sales conversations?

Even without a detailed PD it is possible to direct staff to be more proactive with selling. The key is to explain and remind them of their special role in the organisation as guardians and developers of client relationships, including the process of selling.

If staff do not understand the context of selling for their role they will probably hesitate to implement sales practices. They will remain uncertain as to when, how, why and with whom they should initiate or advance a sales conversation.

Taking Action

What happens next is up to you. It's hard to dispute that sales training is an important – even essential – element for business growth. As a leader in your organisation the challenge is to plan training initiatives that not only engage your team during the training, but also encourage the transfer of learning into the workplace and provide measurable business impact.

The following Management Checklist is a starting point to fast-track your thinking. But there is much more you can do. Review the factors, decide which are priorities for your organisation, and create an action plan for improvement.

So many companies sabotage their sales training investment because of the 15 factors outlined in this report. You don't have to be one of them.

Plan for success!

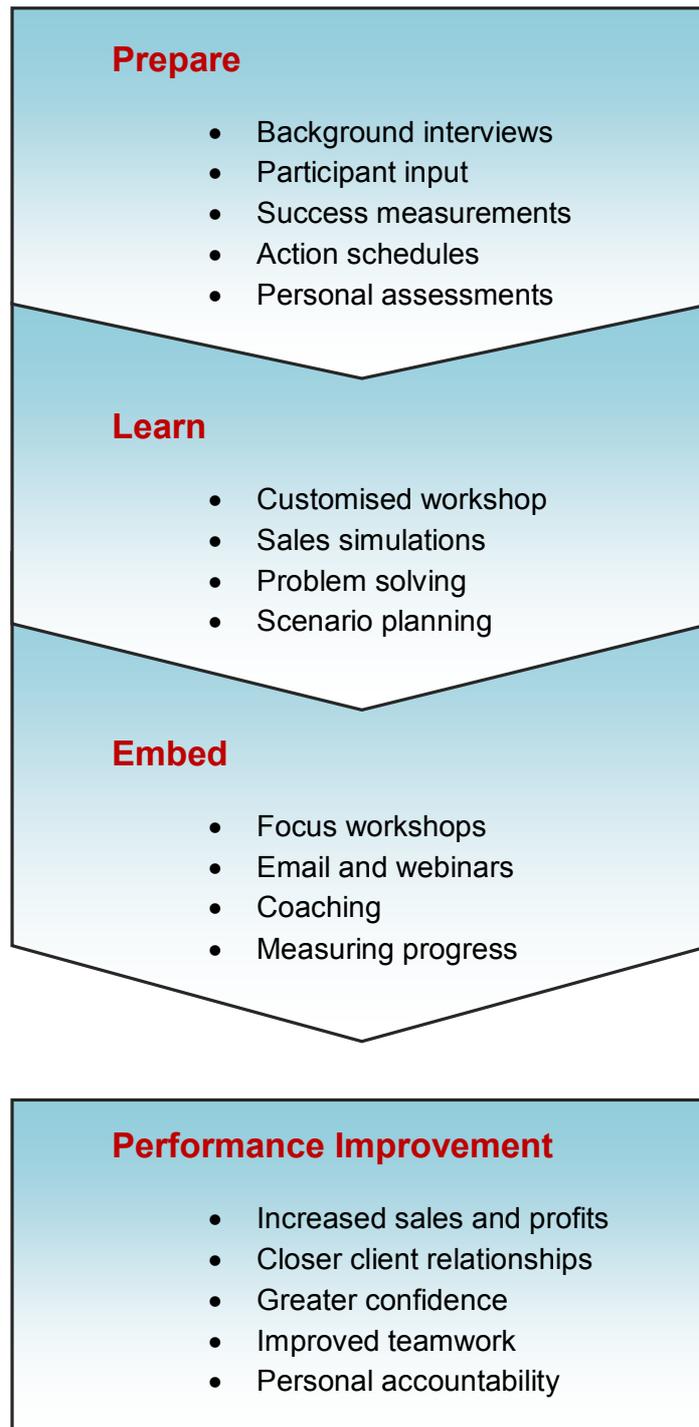
Management Checklist

Cause	Factor	Action / Priority	Improvement Options
Management not committed to change	Lack of strategic vision		Develop and communicate company purpose and goals
	Absence of support for new sales behaviours		Commit to resources, services and coaching to support the team
	No clear expectations for improvement		Identify relevant goals or KPI's, and track accomplishments
Training not relevant for the team	Training doesn't address real sales situations		Agree on and use sales situations that are relevant for the team
	Training doesn't capture the nature of client relationships		Define drivers of client relationships for inclusion in training
	Training doesn't cater for participants learning needs		Review skills gaps prior to training to inform training structure
Staff not committed to improvement	Staff don't believe it will help them personally		Review selection, motivation and expectations of participants
	Staff don't understand the impact for the business		Explain how the 'sales' role contributes to corporate goals
	Staff are scared to adopt new behaviours and processes		Encourage practice and give support after the training event
No sales process or methodology	No consistent path for managing sales		Review sales process; document steps and resources needed
	Competitive advantage not clearly defined		Define competitive advantage and tangible benefits for clients
	Lack of competitive awareness		Review competitors, their key messages, and suitable responses
Vague Position Descriptions	Tasks and responsibilities not clearly defined		Create thorough PD's that provide guidance and accountability
	KPI's not defined, not understood, or not realistic		Ensure KPI's have been set and are understood by all parties
	Lack of context for selling within their broader role		Discuss the expectations and extent of sales activities

How Marketing Nous Can Help You Succeed

Through our pre-training exploration, customisation of training programs, ongoing reinforcement and measurement, and sales consulting services, Marketing Nous can provide the tools and support to ensure a successful training initiative.

Contact us to learn more about our approach and how we can work with your organisation within Australia, South-East Asia and the Middle East.



About the Author



Stuart Ayling specialises in performance improvement for technical specialists and their managers. Stuart has worked in sales and marketing for over 20 years and has developed practical proprietary methodology to ensure transfer of learning from workshop to the work place. He holds a Bachelors Degree in Marketing and a Graduate Certificate in International Business.

Connect with Stuart at LinkedIn <http://au.linkedin.com/in/sayling>

With a background in corporate sales and marketing management roles Stuart founded Marketing Nous in 1999. Since then he has worked with leading businesses across Australia and internationally to improve business development results. He regularly conducts in-house training programs based on his SOX™ Selling methodology, and the PEAC™ Presentation model.

“After initially engaging Stuart based on recommendation we have utilised his skills again at our sales conferences and we will continue to do so in the future! Stuart's training methods have enabled our sales team to challenge their current practices and to see new innovative ways of improving their selling skills in a fun and interactive environment. Our sales results have increased since incorporating Stuart's sessions into our sales conference and this has been during a downturn in the market.”

Justin Zakaras, National Sales and Marketing Manager
Danley Construction Products

“What impressed me straight away with Stuart was his ability to get the right information out of us as managers as to what we really wanted to achieve as a business. I expect to see very positive results from this investment in our people and business. In fact we have already seen a new client on board as a result of our revised learning's from the two-day workshop.”

Mark Mahoney, Managing Director
iMS Group

Contact Marketing Nous to explore your training options.

www.marketingnous.com.au

info@marketingnous.com.au

Telephone: +61 7 3806 2238



Copyright 2012 Marketing Nous. Unauthorised copying is prohibited. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission of the author.