



Get Your Sales Team

IN SHAPE

Sales success can be difficult to achieve without a well-trained sales team

By Michael Chazin

When it comes to success for independent dealers there is, perhaps, no more important element than training. "Training is at the top of the list," says Alex Meloche, director of inside sales and customer service at Monarch Basics in Windsor, Ontario. "Training and onboarding are part of giving people a solid foundation on which to start their career."

"Training is the cornerstone of setting up a sales rep for success," says Shawn Menke,

director of sales at Office Essentials, St. Louis. He contends that if you don't provide both new hires and existing reps with a strong foundation and follow it up with continuing education, failure is a near certainty.

The pace of change in the industry in recent years has made training even more important. "If we don't adapt and do things differently on

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inside sales and the customer service side, then it is going to be much more difficult for us,” says Pam Brooks, business development manager at Ritter’s Office Outfitters, Mansfield, Ohio.

Brooks says that inside sales at Ritter’s now focuses largely on new business prospecting. She says that Ritter’s has experienced steady growth, but the reality of today’s market makes adding new customers more important than ever. “Customers can move a single purchase based on what they see on the internet so quickly that we have to change and look for new ways to grow business proactively,” says Brooks.

Training Impacts Performance

Mike Evert, president, Perimeter Office Products, Lawrenceville, Georgia, says that training is critical, especially with the reality of today’s sales candidates who rarely get hired with industry knowledge. In addition to industry and product knowledge, salespeople need “training in time management, how to be effective, how to be organized and how to retain accounts,” he says.

A commitment to training is not just about improving sales skills and growing sales. It can also impact performance in additional ways.

“It improves morale with all employees,” says Greg Ballard, owner and president at Choice Office Products, Saginaw, Michigan. “When people feel they are involved with the company and they are growing and learning, it contributes to increased confidence and the need for less supervision. The more trained an employee is, the fewer chances there are of committing errors on the job and the more proficient the employee becomes.”

Training is especially important for the performance of customer service personnel suggests Sheila Avenson, office supply sales manager at The Office Shop, Inc., Brainerd, Minnesota.

“Every phone call is different and a training opportunity,” she contends. “Asking the right questions is how we help our customers and overcome objections,” she says.

The Office Shop is an Advantage Dealer with S. P. Richards and draws heavily on that program for its training materials. “The Business Tool Kit has letters and scripts you can use as a guide, for instance, if you need to send out a letter to a new customer,” says Avenson. The dealership also uses training modules from *INDEPENDENT DEALER* contributor Krista Moore through S.P.

New salespeople hired at Office Essentials start off with a robust onboarding program that covers topics such as company history, branding, competition, vertical markets, product categories and selling skills. “The whole process runs about three months,” says Menke. “New sales hires spend one-and-a-half months in our customer service department and then spend time with each of the category managers. The final step is to ride alongside with a tenured sales rep,” he adds. “It is a huge investment, but we are looking for long-term employees.”

The first and third Thursday of every month Office Essentials holds a training session referred to as “Deep Dives.” “It is an in-depth training session typically involving a specific category or a strategic selling opportunity,” explains Menke. To add interest, there might be an incentive associated with the product opportunity or an immediate selling exercise to be applied on the street.

Office Essentials has four category managers—furniture, facility/breakroom, technology and office products—and they each take turns providing “Deep Dives” throughout the year. They discuss the latest trends and then strategize with the sales staff on who is the target audience and how to pursue sales of that particular category.



Alex Meloche
DIRECTOR INSIDE SALES AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

Monarch Basics
Windsor, Ontario

The Best Start

Up-front training is a prerequisite for inside sales representatives, says Brooks. “Telephone prospecting is a process and if you get yourself set up the right way at the beginning, it makes the acquisition of new customers and new business a lot easier,” she says.

When a new inside salesperson starts at Ritter’s, they are in training for one to two weeks before they ever make a phone call. They learn a new process of reaching out and engaging prospects before they do any actual prospecting.

After the first two weeks there is extensive follow-up. For the first 90 days calls are reviewed daily and alternative approaches are discussed. After the introductory period interactions advance. “It becomes a review of customers they brought on board, prospects they have reached and what worked and what didn’t over time,” says Brooks.

When a candidate is hired for a sales position at Monarch Basics they are given three standardized binders to study. One binder covers product knowledge, one is a guide to the CRM software that is used at the dealership and the third binder covers sales training.

Studying the contents of those binders occupies the first month of the new

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representative's time. "Our guys spend close to a month on product knowledge so we never have to visit it again, and they feel confident getting on the phone and selling," says Meloche.

Following that one-month introduction the new salesperson becomes part of the inside sales team, participates in team huddles and day-to-day coaching for the next 60 days. "Once they hit 90 days they start to apply the sales process," says Meloche. They get a swag bag with branded Monarch Basics clothing, product samples and a certificate congratulating them and welcoming them to the company.

"The first two years of their employment are outlined, and as specific milestones are reached they get checked off," continues Meloche. The milestones are set to provide small career-focused victories as the salesperson grows in the position. The light at the end of the tunnel comes when their base salary is dropped, they go on straight commission and their earning potential increases. The entire training process for inside sales was standardized almost two years ago with assistance from INDEPENDENT DEALER contributors from the Methods in Motion sales training organization.



Jim Grabbe
SALES MANAGER

Office Products, Inc.
Russell, Kansas

Home-Grown Training

Jim Grabbe, sales manager at Office Products, Inc., Russell, Kansas, has been in the industry for more than 40 years and has taken his accumulated knowledge, combined it with readily available industry materials and developed his own training program. "The program uses the SPR University program from S. P. Richards and its connection to K.Coaching," says Grabbe. He uses Krista Moore's online training modules and the SPR Fuel Program to develop product training as well as training for both old and new salespeople.

These programs take various forms but frequently there is a test at the end of the lesson that gives an indication of how well the employee is doing. "We hold monthly sales meetings, and if I want to focus on something I will assign a particular training class," says Grabbe. At the meeting the lesson is discussed, and he is able to determine what the salespeople have picked up and what they should be able to apply in the field.

Sales meetings at Perimeter typically contain a training element. "Usually, we have a manufacturer's representative for part of the meeting and then we focus on recognition for accomplishments and sales landmark achievements," says Evert. A training session that involves role playing is almost always included.

Role playing could cover almost any interaction a salesperson is likely to encounter—from a new prospect presentation to a business review or needs analysis, to a category development call for breakroom or janitorial. "We try to make these role playing scenarios as realistic as possible," says Evert.

All sales staff at Monarch Basics attend a monthly meeting where wins and losses are discussed. Monarch Basics records all outgoing calls made by the inside sales team and they provide valuable fodder for the dealership's training efforts. "We



Greg Ballard

OWNER AND PRESIDENT

Choice Office Products
Saginaw, Michigan

do a weekly call review session where we randomly pick three or four calls and play and critique them," says Meloche.

These sessions can be extremely informative. "You will have new people who have just completed training where the lessons are fresh, and they have a recorded sales call that is near perfect," he says. That might be followed by a senior sales person with good numbers but who stumbles on a call because he was unprepared. "At that point it is no one's opinion, you are listening to the actual phone call. Everyone hears the same conversation, as it happens, so it is a fool-proof way to provide feedback, he says.

"That approach creates a good coaching environment where everyone understands the value of ongoing training," Meloche adds. It provides a review of the basics and keeps the foundation strong. "Doing this as frequently as weekly gives us an edge."

Where to Find Outside Help

Independent dealers use a variety of outside resources to augment their training efforts. Industry manufacturers and rep firms are called upon frequently to help with

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training needs. “We host training sessions with manufacturer’s reps covering product attributes and selling skills related to those products,” explains Menke. He points to facility supplies and can liners where sales knowledge might not be the strongest. “It may not be the buyer we traditionally call on so the manufacturer’s rep not only educates the staff on product attributes but also identifies the targeted audience and how to sell to them,” he adds.

If the training is performed by a representative from a multi-line sales group generally the training covers product attributes but offers little on selling skills. A dedicated rep is typically more knowledgeable on selling opportunities related to their products. “If it is a dedicated manufacturer’s rep providing the training, they are usually very involved in customer facing sales activities and staff training exercises,” says Menke.

Brooks at Ritter’s agrees that product detail training generally is readily available. “Now that we have learned about the product we don’t get enough training on how to recognize the best customer to use that product or which market is the best to reach out and try to sell it to,” she says.

“Most of the time the manufacturer’s training focuses on the product but not on

how to sell the product,” says Evert. Those reps tend to be great at product specifications and what the product does but they’re not nearly as strong on what it takes to sell the product or the category, he maintains. **“If reps could sharpen up on the actual selling skills instead of just giving us product knowledge, I would think they would sell more of their product,”** says Evert.

“As the industry evolves and we begin to sell more breakroom and janitorial, training has evolved on how to penetrate those categories,” says Evert. Perimeter relies on manufacturer’s reps and its wholesaler for that training. “Last year the janitorial business development manager from Essendant came and did training on how to sell janitorial effectively and how to place towel and tissue dispensers,” he says.

Similarly, the breakroom business development manager from Essendant has visited Perimeter on several occasions to train on selling coffee. Keurig/Green Mountain also has provided training. “Many of my reps have become very good at selling breakroom and coffee,” he adds.

When it comes to training opportunities, wholesalers are cited as one of the most important resources. “We recently kicked off a new vertical market program where we leaned on the wholesaler for catalog support and category expertise,” says Menke. “We also participate in CORE events provided by Essendant. These events have been a great training resource for independent dealers and provide key information on areas such as dealer marketing, category supply programs, management training and a variety of other tools,” he adds.

Industry meetings are additional resources with educational offerings, and Ballard takes advantage of such settings to further the educations of his sales team. “When we go to the ABC Conference there are always some good speakers, and it is somewhat of a reward for the sales staff,” he says. In the past he has both brought in speakers to his dealership that he saw at a conference and also used materials



Mike Evert

PRESIDENT

Perimeter Office Products

Lawrenceville, Georgia

that he has collected. He adds, “When you train your staff the biggest result is they feel more part of the team.

“Training may also build the employee’s confidence because it gives them a stronger understanding of the industry and the responsibilities of their job,” Ballard continues. **“Continuous training keeps employees on the cutting edge of industry developments,”** he adds. **“Employees who are competent and on top of changing industry standards help your company hold a position as a leader and strong competitor within the industry.”**

The alert manager is always on the lookout for training opportunities to make sure all employees are aware of the expectations and procedures within the company.

Ballard works with a local prospecting company to develop leads for Choice Office Products. As he learned about their operations he recognized they had a solid approach for initial prospecting so he asked if they could come in and talk to his customer service department. “There were similarities in what they do with our needs and the presentation worked well,” he says.

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Pam Brooks

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

Ritter’s Office Outfitters

Mansfield, Ohio

Help for Smaller Dealers

As a smaller dealer Grabbe finds it difficult to afford outside speakers or consultants. Still he says there are ample opportunities to find free materials. One source he uses is YouTube. "I will look at different videos covering what I want to learn and then use them to develop topics to talk about to our people," he says. He takes bits and pieces of what he sees along with materials that he reads to develop training materials.

In the past, smaller dealerships weren't able to offer much training to new hires, says Grabbe. The usual approach was to throw new salespeople to the sharks and have them sink or swim. He says that approach has been in force for decades. "I have tried to take it a bit further," he says. He gives his salespeople information to help them get closer to customers or to make better presentations. "That way you are not just selling products but you are selling information," he points out.

The internet has changed the sales process dramatically and salespeople need to be more aware, says Brooks. "Getting customers to visit your website has become a lot more important," she says.



Sheila Avenson
OFFICE SUPPLY SALES MANAGER

The Office Shop, Inc.
Brainerd, Minnesota

"But when they order online they bypass customer service and the sales rep so they don't have the personal involvement that they used to." More touches are required by the salesperson and they need to learn to become more proactive to bring more personal involvement back to the process.

"Technology allows us to access training that previously was unavailable," says Ballard. More webinars are offered so the sales force no longer has to assemble as a group for every training session. "There are a lot of materials out there and everybody can view them on their laptop on the road or at home," he says.

"The investment in training that a company makes shows employees they are valued," adds Ballard. Training creates a supportive workplace and employees who feel appreciated and challenged through training opportunities may find more job satisfaction. "The goal is to improve employee performance, and consistent training allows you to strengthen those skills that each employee needs to improve," he says.

Is Your Training Effective?

No matter what the training source, dealer management always requires some way to evaluate what is offered and how effective it might have been in terms of changing habits and approaches that salespeople take. "The effectiveness is really evaluated by the sales dollar increase or lack thereof," says Grabbe. It tends to be measurable by whether or not sales are increasing. "Are we gaining new customers, and are we raising our profit dollars?"

So much of any evaluation comes down to whether or not the dealership is growing, suggests Brooks. "For inside sales I track how many new customers are brought on, the volume of new sales, what percentage the territory is growing and the type of product categories they are selling," she explains.

The whole reason you bring on a new



Shawn Menke
DIRECTOR OF SALES

Office Essentials
St. Louis, Missouri

inside salesperson is the expectation that you want more customers and more business. "If there is no ongoing accountability, ongoing measurement or tracking of how well a person is doing, then the training is kind of irrelevant," she adds.

"If we notice a slump in performance we put the onus on us first and make sure to have a discussion with that person," says Meloche. If the poor performance continues, a performance plan is developed where the salesperson is followed regularly and numbers are reviewed to make sure that person is set up to win. "We also look back at the training to see if any steps were missed," he adds.

Any dealer looking to build a training program can start by learning what is available through industry resources but they also need to have a commitment to the process. **"Training is as much a sales job as selling itself," says Meloche. Whoever is in charge of training has to be convinced that the process works and, perhaps, have done it themselves. "They need to understand what they are training their people to do which can be difficult if they have not done it themselves."**

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