

# The state of sales training



In September, *Training Journal*, in conjunction with sales training provider Imparta, invited a group of learning and development professionals to a special lunch at a top London restaurant, to discuss the state of sales training, now and in the future. **Elizabeth Eyre** recaps what was said



**G**etting the most out of sales training is a thorny problem. Sales people are notoriously cynical and hard to engage – ‘what’s in it for me’ seems to be tattooed on their foreheads – and not all of them want to inhabit the touchy-feely world of modern consultative selling. They’re activists, mainly driven by bonuses, and they just want to sell, sell, sell!

So, in a world that no longer revolves around simply closing a deal and moving on to the next one, how can you train your sales staff so that they engage with your organisation’s values and reflect

them in their selling techniques? We asked Tony Perrio (senior sales training manager at the Yell Group), Carolyn Hunt (national sales training manager at Pfizer Global Pharmaceuticals), Tim Baynes (learning and development manager at Microsoft), Catherine Eaton-Terry (development manager, sales and marketing, at Siemens Enterprise Communications), Liz Barrett (HR director at Thomson Financial), Gerry Murray (CEO of Huveaux Plc) and Catherine Schalk (director of sales operations at Computer Associates) to take part in a round-table discussion of the issues, at a special lunch co-hosted by sales training provider Imparta,

whose CEO Richard Barkey and sales practice manager Graeme Harper were present, with Dr Peter Honey acting as chairman.

The aim was to share experiences and good practice in sales training and developing sales people’s capabilities.

After introducing themselves by recounting the best and worst experiences they have had in a training session (which ranged from participants not wanting to participate and the problems caused by clashing cultures, to the wonders of leading trainees through underground caves), the round-tableers proceeded to hold a lively discussion around the following seven questions:

### 1. What are the current issues with sales skills in your organisation/sector?

The main problem at Siemens Enterprise Communications, said Eaton-Terry, was caused by its move from being a telecoms company to being an IT data company: 'Our biggest issue is getting people to change their mode of selling. We want to help them sell more consultatively and help them interact confidently with customers at a high level. There should be nothing stopping them walking into the room and saying to a CFO: "Let me talk to you about your business", rather than talking about our product.'

Changing the way sales people interact with their accounts, from a transactional engagement that's focused on products to a business value relationship, and getting sponsored access to c-level executives were issues for Schalk. She said: 'Presentation skills are a vital success factor in delivering key messages to the client that will establish credibility and further access to key decision-makers. There is a strong focus on the size and value of the pipeline, rather than the quality of opportunities being pursued, and this is having an impact on win ratios, cost of sales, resource-management and customer satisfaction.'

But for Barrett, building and managing relationships with customers was not a problem – in fact, the Thomson Financial sales team is too good at it! She said: 'What we find is that we have many good relationship managers but not many people who are hunters, who can go out and find new business. Our sales force feel that they shouldn't be touting for new business, they should be working with existing clients. Maybe we went too far with our relationship management training!'

Barkey and Perrio identified the issue of sales people understanding the 'fundamental language' of their



Catherine Schalk and Graeme Harper listen to the debate

customers in order to understand their businesses. Perrio said: 'You have to deal with key decision-makers and you have to talk their language. Core sales people talk to many different people – how do they build the capability to ask good questions and listen, to pick up the signals and relate to people, rather than going into a meeting with all guns blazing?'

For Hunt, tighter regulation of the pharmaceutical industry was an issue for her sales teams: 'Our sector is becoming more heavily regulated and it's creating a fear factor amongst sales reps of overstepping the mark. We have to think very carefully about how we train our field force to adapt in a constantly-changing environment; it's very tricky.'

### 2. What factors do you take into account when seeking to improve sales effectiveness?

Murray said that, for him, it was all down to hard work: 'I don't think we pay enough attention to it. We get a little over-awed by process, technique, fashion, but we need to go back to basics and concentrate on hard graft and effective calls.'

For Baynes, however, the key is making sure that everything the sales force does is aligned to the business strategy. 'If you can do that,' he said, 'it's very easy to get buy-in from people who are going to be paying for it and from people who are going to be in training.'

It's easy to sell something to sales people if there's a business reason attached to it.'

His views were echoed by Hunt, who said that, for sales effectiveness to be improved, training must be related to the business. 'The first thing is to make sure you understand what the business issues are, then prioritise and develop training interventions to deliver to the business. We have to advance our business performance, so let's make sure we stick to what it's all about.'

Schalk added that a 'key factor' in changing sales behaviour was the involvement of management: 'It's got to be driven by management, reinforced by management. If there's no management support, the benefits of training will be short-lived.'

Eaton-Terry added that managers should be made responsible for following up sales team training and penalise team members if they didn't 'do XYZ' as they had agreed.

Perrio said it was important to remember the impact of new initiatives on the sales people themselves. 'We come up with some great ideas but sometimes we forget about the end user and the impact on their work, their home lives and their time. These things have to be deliverable.'

**'We're noticing that the tables are turning in training – people are fed up with computers taking over their lives; they want to talk to somebody and ask questions'**

### 3. To what extent should sales training reflect the existing cultural values of an organisation?

The panel agreed that sales training had to be part of value culture behaviour – everyone in an organisation speaking the same language and managers enforcing its values.

'You can upskill people and give them knowledge but, if you're not getting down to the nitty gritty of the behaviour you expect and supporting them in that, it won't work,' said Hunt. 'It's important that training is part of the cultural values; it's a big mistake if it's on its own.'

Schalk said that training should be in line with an organisation's cultural values but that culture had to be positioned 'very carefully' within sales training: 'Sales people can be very cynical – they've heard the message of corporate values and culture many times before. You've got to find fresh ways of delivering the message.'

She agreed with Eaton-Terry that showing sales people the value and benefits to them of cultural values is paramount in securing their engagement.

Murray said that if culture could be successfully combined with the work that sales people did, it would be a 'catalyst for moving things along' in terms of figures and performance.

Barrett said: 'It's one of the most difficult issues to deal with conceptually. We know that a major conveyor for culture is training, particularly if you have a low-key approach to values and vision statements etc. Then you do tend to end up with a culture that's emerging rather than designed. You can inculcate values through training but you have to do it very, very carefully – you have to start from the point of view: "If I'm demonstrating integrity, how will that help me make more sales?"'

'We are trying to get a consistent message about culture across to our sales force on a softly-softly basis, but we are pushing the idea that "this will make your sales figures better". We have made the link between integrity and culture and their sales performance: they are very easy to sell to if you can establish the sales value with them.'

Barkey said training could be used to move a traditional culture in a new direction. O2 had established the O2 Way programme to set out its cultural expectations for employees and to make those expectations part of the training process. Harper added that employees' initial resistance to the programme disappeared when they realised that cultural values were inseparable from the business strategy.

'They have to be joined up,' added Barkey.

Perrio said that the Yell Group training department had asked a company to come in and watch its sales training, particularly its induction training, in order to benchmark it against other companies. 'Values came out pretty well. It's important that those delivering the training act in the way we want our people to act so that delegates recognise it as the values of the organisation.'

### 4. How do you decide which sales training methods are the best fit for your organisation and how do you incorporate new methods into existing sales practices?

Schalk said the method and content of training depends on its objectives, a sentiment echoed by Baynes, who added: 'Sales guys are cynical but they like a challenge. They respond to a challenge, so we use role play.'

Schalk went on to recommend experiential learning for behavioural change and computer-based learning for product training.

Perrio said some employees say that training 'isn't like the real world' and added: 'I'd really like to find new ways to make training like the real world: how to bring theoretical models into what works in the real world.'

Barrett said: 'Engage the successful people in an environment, as a definite frame that can help people translate learning into the real world.'

The theme of relating training to the real world was continued by Schalk, who said that the credibility of the trainer – 'have they had that experience, have they been in that environment, have they stood in front of a customer and had rejection after rejection?' – is vital for building a rapport with trainees that makes training work.

Eaton-Terry said her company uses actors to make training as realistic as possible. 'My experience of



Catherine Eaton-Terry makes a point to (from left) Carolyn Hunt, Dr Peter Honey, Tony Perrio and Richard Barkey



Tim Baynes explains his vision of the future

it has been that people have said it's as close as you can get to the real world. If you can build a relationship with a group [of trainees], it works every time.'

Murray asked for the panel's views on technology, such as e-learning and simulations. Barrett felt it had a place as part of a blended learning solution and could be 'incredibly useful' for giving people product knowledge; but, since most sales people were activists and would rather be interacting with someone than spending long periods in front of a computer, it was not as useful as a sales training tool.

Hunt said simulations were useful, especially for facilitating learning: 'They have a place but they're quite resource-hungry, so you'd need to know that you'll get the value back.'

But Schalk's view was that the 'tables are turning slightly' away from technology and back to old-fashioned, people-based learning. She told the panel: 'Although we're a technology company, we're finding that we need to go back to basics – it's people interaction that works the best. People are craving that again – they want to talk to somebody and ask questions. They are fed up with computers taking over their lives.'

Eaton-Terry said it was sometimes difficult to know what training methods were best because their customers – Siemens Enterprise Communications sales people

– hadn't been consulted often enough in the past about what worked for them; the company was implementing a new evaluation system this year that would make 'a good deal of difference'. Schalk said she had established a panel of employees, representing the whole of Computer Associates, to give feedback on training projects and how they will fit into various parts of the business.

Dr Honey added: 'It's amazing how little proper research has been done into the effectiveness of different training methods. Each method has its advocates but there is very little hard evidence about the effectiveness of different methods in different situations. We choose the methods we like and enforce them on other people, whether they like it or not! It's a matter of individual choice, but whether there's a systematic way of choosing methods that really do deliver is questionable.'

He then asked the panel to describe the difficulties they have experienced in incorporating new methods into existing sales practices. Hunt said a problem was not allowing the novelty factor of new practices get in the way of delivering the desired outcome: 'New things are seen as positive, quite invigorating. In my experience, anything new is welcomed. The challenge is getting the outcome you wanted from it rather than being selected because it's novel.'

Barrett said the preferences of individual learners had to be taken more into account, and that sending people on training courses identified by psychometric tests could lead to them being stereotyped.

**5. What, in your experience, is the best way to train sales people so that the learning (a) sticks, (b) gets used, and (c) makes a difference?** The panel agreed that the days of sending sales people on week-long training courses were over and that training now had to be

delivered in 'short, sharp amounts'. Hunt said: 'We've been working with various companies to deliver things in 90 minute slots – mind gym-type things. You only need to go away with one piece of information to make a 5 or 10 per cent difference to your performance – which is great.'

Perrio agreed that 'smaller chunks' of training were necessary.

When asked by Barkey what they thought the role was of managers in training, all the panel agreed that, for training to be successful, managers had to be involved and there had to be 'consequences' for them if they didn't support their team's training. 'With our longer training programmes, we are trying to spend half a day with sales managers first, to explain their role during and after the process. Managers have to be accountable for enforcing skills and knowledge gained during the training if it is to be successfully adopted by the sales force,' said Schalk. 'There's got to be follow-up by managers and a consistent, clear message of support, encouragement and enforcement.'

She added that training had to be relevant to people's jobs and address the different skills sets required by their roles.

Perrio said that, where managers buy into training, their people benefit with support. 'There is a conversation in our organisation about whether we're coaching or training. It's probably a mixture of the two,' he added. 'We need to work harder to make our managers better coaches.'

The panel agreed that managers needed to be supported and encouraged to coach team members following training, being trained in coaching themselves if necessary. 'We're establishing the value argument here,' said Barrett. 'Managers have to see the value of the training or coaching. We have to articulate the proposition to them as well as to the sales force.'

And Dr Honey added: 'It's clear that what happens before and after a piece of training is even more important than what happens during training. It makes such a difference.'

#### 6. How do you assess/measure ROI?

The panel's opinions on this differed. Hunt said the value of training was not communicated enough within organisations. 'Everything's measurable,' she added. 'One thing we don't often do is communicate it. Measuring ROI is as simple as getting five or six things, hard facts as well as qualitative things, and assessing them; the big thing is continuous communication.'

Barkey said that communication had to be within the sales force itself, as well as to external customers. 'With sales it's quite a bit easier to measure the impact of training. You can get people to give case study examples of where it's made a difference; then you can quite quickly separate the wheat from the chaff and identify effective approaches.'

Hunt, on the other hand, said ROI couldn't be quantified. 'It's about the direction you're going in – it's a trend – and sometimes we strive too hard to get it down to a specific monetary value. You have to ask yourself what the business changes are that you're trying to bring about at the end of the day, for example, a reduction in customer complaints.'

Schalk said Computer Associates had established a 'comprehensive' score card and wanted to see an upward trend in all of the things included on it. 'We've also attached our training to customer satisfaction,' she said. 'We've built into our customer surveys questions about the sales team's performance and whether its members add value for customers. That's one of our key measurements – customer satisfaction.'

'Our key objective in building sales training is equipping our sales force to perform at their highest levels, increasing customer satisfaction and sharing our values.'

#### 7 Finally, some crystal ball-gazing; how will sales training look in ten years' time?

The panel were all agreed that, while it might change its format, traditional face-to-face training will never die out. Baynes asked: 'Will [sales training] change that much? Face-to-face will still be as important as ever, because it's been so important for so long, so I'm not sure it's going to change. It depends what the training needs to achieve. If the content is stable and easy to get across, putting it on an iPod is a very cool thing to do; if you need deep-changing behaviour, I think you'll still need to do it face to face.'

Murray said there will be fewer sales people in a decade's time as self-service took over the sales process. 'Customer service will be highly technology-assisted,' he predicted. 'Where we find ourselves in the same face-to-face situations as we do today, we'll face exactly the same issues. I do keep wondering whether technology will ever really



Liz Barrett and Richard Barkey discuss sales training

become a help to that. My instinctive belief is that it will be, but I have no proof.'

Barkey predicted that, with the help of technology, training and coaching will be carried out in the field, with customers, rather than in classrooms.

Barrett said she could see a scenario in which training became increasingly commoditised, with low-to-medium value-added training becoming more dominant. She also thought the quality of instructor-led training would improve and lead to increased value.

Schalk said technology would drive a lot of training in the future. She agreed with Eaton-Terry that there may be less ILT but that, where ILT was available, it would be of better quality. ■

## Summing up the discussion

Dr Honey summed up the event: 'As ever, it was fascinating to hear the views of seven people drawn from a cross-section of organisations. They were all passionate about the importance of selling skills and they all had a vested interest in delivering effective sales training. Perhaps inevitably, given their different organisational cultures, priorities and concerns, many of their views differed. A summary that ties a neat bow round the conversation is therefore difficult to provide!

'The key points of agreement seemed to be the need to forge strong links between sales training and the business strategy by showing sales people 'what's in it for you'. Reservations were expressed about using e-learning as some sort of panacea. In fact, some people thought the pendulum needed to swing back to more face-to-face training provided it was "short and sharp".'

'And, as ever, the need for line managers to do their bit to support training interventions came through loud and clear. There is no question that trainers, however enthusiastic and talented, cannot do it on their own!'

'A good time was had by all.'