



## ENTERPRISE

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### Refining techniques through role-playing can boost sales

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How many times have you tried to implement new selling techniques, but found it difficult to change your salespeople's habits? How often have you exposed your new salespeople to the correct selling methodology, but later found they weren't doing what you taught them? How frequently have you identified shortcomings in your salespeople's skills but found they are difficult to correct?

If these problems sound familiar, then maybe it's time to look into a different approach for your sales training.

Sales training through role-playing might be your answer.

Role-playing is an excellent exercise for:

- Analyzing problems from many different perspectives.
- Carrying out brainstorming methodology in simulations of real-world selling situations.
- Applying various selling solutions in case scenarios.
- Developing teamwork, cooperation, and creative problem-solving in cross-functioning groups.
- Exercising creative techniques in a risk-free environment.

For instance, you might train new salespeople by having two people act out a selling-scenario. One acts as the salesperson. The other acts as the customer. This allows sales trainees to practice their sales techniques in a risk-free environment, before they get in front of the buyer. A trainer and other trainees can watch the role-play, learn as they watch and critique it afterwards.

There can be many misunderstandings surrounding this valuable training tool. Role-playing is not just "practicing out loud" or imitating material in front of others.

Rather, role-playing is the systematic building of correct habit patterns in a low-stress environment, followed by individual critique and correction of errors through rehearsal.

When Chuck Wiedenhofer, national sales manager for Boedeker Plastics Inc., was tasked to find a way to get his inside and outside sales teams to work more effectively together to find creative solutions for their customers' unique demands, he knew he needed a fresh approach.

Marvin Boedeker, founder of the Shiner-based firm, knew that a disconnect between his inside and outside sales teams could hurt the company's stellar growth.

Boedeker and Wiedenhofer asked me to set up a series of role-playing exercises that could help accomplish that goal. In each role-play, an inside and outside salesperson had to work together fielding questions and objections from pseudo-prospects while trying to keep sales presentations on track.

"Everybody learned," Wiedenhoefer says.

The inside and outside salespeople experienced firsthand how important it is for them to work effectively together, and how prospects would respond if they did not.

Wiedenhoefer and the salespeople gained confidence, as well as insight into the dynamics of teamwork and creative thinking. In addition, they learned how frustrating it would be to their clients if the synergies between the inside and outside sales teams were not continuously fostered.

"We'll be doing this again," he says.

Confidence is the most important characteristic any salesperson can have. The fact is, the more confidence they gain, the more sales they will likely close.

Role-playing a selling scenario is the easiest and most effective way for salespeople to build confidence for selling in the real world.

The more successful they are in the training, the more likely they will be successful out in the field. It gives them the opportunity to learn new product information, test their selling skills and try new approaches.

Role-playing also can be used to practice dealing with difficult situations in a safe, comfortable environment. Role-playing is flexible and can be designed for any size sales team. Salespeople can work in small groups with other salespeople or in a large group during a sales meeting.

To dramatically increase the effectiveness of role-playing sessions, you can use a video recorder to record the role-plays. Place the camera on a tripod in the back of the room so that it is not distracting, and have an observer turn it on and off. Use a different videotape for each salesperson and let him or her keep the tape for viewing later.

Tape each role-play session and the corresponding discussion afterward so that each salesperson will have both on tape. Make sure you get a number of different role-playing sessions on the same tape. Each salesperson will then have a library of sessions to review in order to see his or her ongoing improvements.

Role-playing as part of a comprehensive training program is undoubtedly one of the best methods of developing interpersonal skills in a safe situation. It can bring new life to material that would otherwise be "academic" in the pejorative sense of the term. Selling can be tough.

That is why most companies improve their odds of selling success through the use of sales training. No sales training program is really complete until you have included some role-playing. Success in these role-playing sessions back at the office will build confidence in your salespeople, as well as provide the extra motivation to go out and sell to your customers and prospects.

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