

Training As A Marketing Tool

Techno - sophistication being the by-word of the modern market place, are today's marketers geared to handle the pressure of selling the hi-tech products that are being launched almost one after another? Muhamed Muneer explains how companies can train their sales teams to sell smart



PHILIPS INDIA RECENTLY came out with a series of new launches in succession: their Eurostar Color TV, CD Music System, Car Stereo, and so on. More are expected pretty soon. Each of these is a technological marvel on its own. Our markets have not seen such hectic and fast paced sophistication before.

The troublesome days of freezing, ice-clogging refrigerators are finally over. In its place we now have the no-frost refrigerator era, with Videocon leading the way. Newer players into this field like BPL are changing even this relatively new

market by launching world class products like their 4- door refrigerating systems, etc. Technological sophistication seems to be the catchword today.

The era of super-convenient, super-specialty products has arisen. Look at what's happening around you. Today's generation don't just cook their dinner; they 'microwave' it. They don't just wash their cloth; they 'launder' it and dry it in fully-automatic washing machines. They don't just clean their dish; they 'dish wash' it. And they don't just adjust their AC switch; they 'remote-control' it. Government moves of liberalization and the advent of technology are finally changing the entire marketing scenario in this country. Today's marketers are hand- pressed to find ways to cope up with such demands as selling hi- tech products which are being launched one after another.

The situation, as it stands to- day, requires most of our companies to take a second look at their existing sales setup. Many companies send their new sales recruits into the field almost immediately after selecting them. They then supply brochures, samples, order books, etc. to these reps and assign some areas to cover. It is no won- der that most of them produce lit- tle or no sales order.

Such a sales force would be ill- prepared to face the challenges posed by the competition and the marketplace, let alone that of new technology. They would not be able to even answer simple questions and be in no position to decide on their objectives. They would not know the basic needs and wants of the buyer. This was what led to the fall of a once-strong detergent maker in India.

Their sales force was overpaid, incompetent and damagingly arrogant. A typical salesman of this company approaches a retailer and commands: 'It's time for that order now. Take 24 boxes now. In two weeks time, I shall send another 24. The poor retailer, always in awe of the company's great name, nods his consent. Many a time, he inquires how much he has bought last year in total. Our salesman almost always stumbles on this one because he rarely does his homework. So he says: "Well, I really don't know... We'll have to check the records. With competitors offering instant information with due respects, no wonder this company, its big name not with standing, was sold off to a MNC!

What makes companies like HLL, P&G, ITC and the like stand apart? They all have great training programs. This is a vital marketing tool today. For all types of products. Agreed, training programs are costly. They involve expenses vis- à-vis

instructors, materials and space; opportunity loss because of lost sales when sales reps are not in the field, and so on. But they are essential.

New sales reps need to spend at least a couple of months in training. According to one study, the median training period is 28 weeks in industrial products companies, 12 weeks in service companies and four weeks in consumer products companies. Of course training time varies with the complexity of the selling task and the type of person recruited. In HLL, a new sales rep is not on his own for nearly two years! And they expect their sales reps to spend three to four weeks every year in additional training, preferably in rural markets.

Most Indian companies today realize that the money spent on training is indeed more value-adding. The bill for sales training is always on the rise these days.

Every basic and introductory training program should aim at giving the sales reps all or several of the following:

- **Information on the company:** The first part of the training program should usually devote to describing the company's history and mission, the organization, lines of authority, key executives, financial highlights, major products, and sales volume and growth.

- **Information on the products:-** Sales reps should be given a tour through the manufacturing plants to show how the products are made and how they function.

- **Information on the customer and the competition:** Educating the sales reps on major customers and their needs, buying pattern and habits, etc. is very important. The program should also outline in detail about the competitor's products and their marketing strategies. Make comparisons between your company and the competitors.

- **Training on making effective sales presentations:-** Here, they should be trained on salesmanship, etc. The company should emphasize major sales arguments for each product.

- **Information on field procedures and responsibilities:-** Sales reps should be taught how they can manage their time between active and potential accounts, how to prepare expense accounts, route reports, etc.

As the market for high technology changes, sales people are being asked to sell

new products aggressively-but they don't understand how these products work or how they benefit customers.

Your sales force may be competent selling your existing traditional products. The reps are comfortable with them, they know how the products work, how to handle every conceivable objection, and how to solve most implementation problems. That is, assuming you have given proper basic training to your sales force.

But marketing new, hi-tech products is a different ballgame. Your reps are afraid that the customers won't like the new product, or that they'll raise objections the reps can't answer. They are uncomfortable with the new products because they are leaving their comfort zones for uncharted waters.

Some sales people, may be 10% or 20%, are willing to enter those waters. These top performers will be successful, but to make your sales goals, you have got to get the mid level performers to speed up on the new products.



That's where product-sales training comes in. It is a hybrid of product training (what it is, how it works, etc.) and sales training (qualifying prospects, presenting benefits, etc.).

It has two goals: excite and motivate the sales force, and educate and equip the

sales force to sell the product. There are seven steps to follow:

1. Avoid quick-fix solutions. Don't have your product experts stand up in front of a class of sales people and drone through countless overhead transparencies. That's quick, but it does not fix anything. Godrej-GE, when they launched their version of the frost-free refrigerators, conducted branch-level seminars to familiarize the dealers and sales officers with the product. Unfortunately, it was a quick-fix program. A sales manager giving presentation on a product even he is not confident in! Remember the story of the man who asked the watchmaker what time it was? Your sales reps want to know what time it is, not how to make the watch. They need to know how to sell the product, not how to make it.

2. Take a look at the audience you want to train. What level of technical competence and sales skills do they exhibit? What are their qualifications? What level do they need to achieve to become successful?

3. Develop overall objectives. Do you want your sales people to find leads, qualify prospects, sell, configure, close, and install the product? Or do you just want them to qualify prospects and turn them over to technical specialists?

4. Design the right mix of media to use in training. Classroom training is relatively inexpensive to create, but it can be expensive to implement with a large number of participants.

A better way is to separate the knowledge portion of the training from the skills portion.

The knowledge part could be done through self-paced training using work books, computer-based training, videotapes, audiotapes, or other types of multimedia. This type of training saves significant costs in travel and expenses, out-of-territory time, etc. Highly competent participants can test out of the basic levels and move to advanced levels.

At the end of the self-paced training, participants can take a test to certify that they are ready for the skills portion, which can be included in a tightly-focused classroom session. In the class, participants at about the same level of knowledge will master their skills through role-playing, presentations, and other exercises.

5. Develop course structure, agenda, content and materials. This should cover all the areas required.

6. Develop a project plan to ensure that the training project has access to the right resources, is completed on time, and meets overall course objectives. Resources management support and access to product experts and successful field sales reps are included.

Other elements of the plan should include a way to track successful completion of training by participants and to certify them as ready to sell the product.

7. Develop a follow-up plan. Training should not be just an event but a process. Send course updates to graduates. Consider audio tapes to help them stay competent.

Once these seven steps are done, your company too can launch new high-technology products and compete with global giants. And that indeed would be the day!

Muhammed Muneer C P has extensive marketing and management experience. His articles on marketing and management appear in various publications around the world.
