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Help keep the salespeople in the game with tech-based training

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Are your sales reps getting the training they need? According to a Cahners survey of more than 23,000 companies, 58 percent of buyers say that sales reps are not able to answer questions effectively.

Typically, reps are trained through sales meetings, PowerPoint slides and web-based presentations. If they don't use the information immediately, however, they don't remember it. People retain 58 percent of the knowledge after 33 minutes, 33 percent retention after three days, and only 15 percent retention after three weeks, according to the Research Institute of America. These methods are still a useful part of training, but they don't fulfill reps' needs.

In reality, sales reps continually rely on subject-matter experts for answers.
These experts eventually become overwhelmed with calls and e-mails with repetitive questions from any number of sales reps. Meanwhile, sales teams complain about a lack of training and too much time wasted searching for information. They spend an average of 40 percent of their time trying to find information and 70 percent of that time spent recreating information that can't be found. What sales reps really need is just-in-time, just-enough information. They can't spend time reviewing an entire course to answer one question.

Product introductions and sales training should be managed on a continuum and not driven by discrete events. Training needs to move from monolithic, two- to three-hour presentations, to easily consumable topics that can be deployed anytime and are available worldwide.

Many sales organizations are using a combination of in-person classroom training or sales meetings and personalized e-learning to better prepare their reps. With this model, technical knowledge, such as new product information, is disseminated through PowerPoint slides and e-learning modules prior to the sales meetings. Assessments are attached to all materials, because they are essential for understanding staff competencies and ensuring a baseline competency before entering the meeting. Assessments also help hone the sales meeting agenda for future e-learning modules.

It is also important that reps have access to the community and experts prior to the live training sessions. By interacting with their peers and internal experts, reps can hone their knowledge by asking questions and share their learning experiences through discussion forums. The meeting can then be focused on mentoring and role playing to reinforce that knowledge by putting it into practice.

After the meetings, reps should have ongoing access to the collective knowledge gained through the community and expert interactions. By centrally storing question-and-answer sets, documents and e-learning modules for future reference, reps can eliminate dozens of unnecessary phone calls or e-mails to experts to find the information needed to make a sale. Instead, reps have access to these materials, in a just-in-time, just-enough manner, so that they can continue to enhance and refine their knowledge as needed.

By using these capabilities, organizations can change the dynamic of a sales meeting to provide engaging, interactive, scenario-based activities that make better use of the time and investment.

Continuous knowledge sharing

Once the knowledge is gained, it is important for companies to facilitate shared learning. This can happen by capturing the collective knowledge gained on an ongoing basis and distributing it in a usable fashion. Making discussion forums and knowledge bases available makes it easy for reps to learn from peer and expert interactions. Access to a knowledge base provides immediate answers to questions. Expertise location and management capabilities allow reps to ask follow-up questions that are captured in the knowledge bank. This enables organizations to use existing knowledge and make sure newly acquired knowledge is reusable.

But how do you get busy and often impatient sales reps to use yet another sales tool? One method is to allow them to continue using their standard e-mail application, but route e-mails through the expertise management systems, so useful information from a product manager is automatically captured without requiring human intervention.

Personalization is also a key component of a successful e-learning initiative. An effective e-learning producer should allow for the delivery of specific information to individuals based on their role and proficiency assessment. Simply put, people need access to the knowledge required for them to effectively perform their jobs, without it overlapping with what they already know. This includes shared company knowledge captured from discussion forums and e-mail threads. This provides agents with specific knowledge that's readily consumable without inundating them with too much or irrelevant information.

By capturing internal knowledge on a continual basis, reps can easily stay informed and get the information they need on a moment's notice, so they can get back to doing what they do best — selling.

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