

HOW SOFT SKILLS TRAINING
BOOSTS SALES GROWTH





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Ultimately, the goal of any for-profit organization is to maximize profits by retaining existing business and creating new business, while lowering the cost to acquire new business.

Creating new business through the sales process looks slightly different at every organization, but conventional wisdom surrounding the process of convincing someone to buy is largely the same, no matter what type of product or service you're selling.

Traditional sales training urges sales reps to follow a process that looks something like this:



Prospect companies that most likely need your services.



Set up a meeting with the decision makers at that company.



Present your solutions by demonstrating the benefits that the company and decision makers will receive by allowing you to solve their problems.



Prove the value of your solution by showing how the cost of the problems you solve is greater than the cost of your solution.

The phrase “easier said than done” certainly comes to mind here. Yet, this sales process is ingrained in the mind of every sales rep. For many, memorizing and understanding this process, coupled with job shadowing and making practice calls constitutes all the training that sales reps receive.

It's no surprise then, that a 2015 survey by Bridge Group discovered that the average annual turnover rate in sales was a staggering 34 percent — more than one out of every three sales reps leave their companies each year, and nearly one in five of those are leaving voluntarily, often burnt out by rejection, quotas, and the other factors that cause sales to be a high-stress job.

Unsurprisingly, the research also showed that companies with less than 25 percent annual attrition have 12 percent more reps meeting quota than companies with greater than 25 percent attrition. **To put it simply, when reps are more likely to achieve quota, they are more likely to stay with a company.**

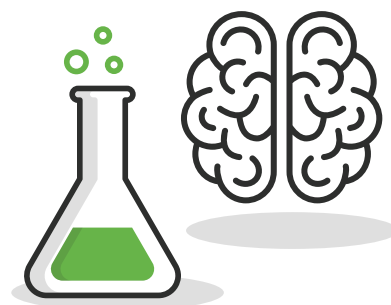
Helping your sales reps to be successful is in the best interest of everyone, so let's explore what you can do to optimize your sales training process.

How We Make Decisions

To understand what makes a sales rep successful, we have to understand why a sale is won.

In the 1970s, a neuroscientist named Antonio Damasio began researching emotions, a practice which was derided and mocked by his colleagues. In 2014, Damasio told *Technology Review*, “We were told very often, ‘Well, you’re going to be lost, because there’s absolutely nothing there of consequence.’ We were pitied for our poor choice.”

Many researchers had already arrived at the conclusion that emotions were not really worth studying. After all, much of neuroscience is about understanding the human brain, and what makes it unique. And since animals had emotions, it was believed that our emotions couldn’t hold many secrets about human life. Instead, researchers studied logic, reasoning, and creativity – the traits that were largely unique to humans.



Damasio changed things drastically in the 1990s, however, when he performed a study on people who had suffered damage to the part of their brains that generated emotions.

What he discovered was that while these people were seemingly normal – they were able to reason with logic – **they couldn’t make basic decisions.**

Through experimentation, Damasio had proven something that completely revolutionized sales and marketing. Decision making often does not operate on logic alone – emotions play a large role within how people come to decisions.

Training Beyond the Sales Process

While the research about emotional decision making was groundbreaking to sales trainers and reps savvy enough to understand the implications, most sales training never really adapted to the knowledge that emotions are crucial in decision making.

Instead, sales training typically relies on teaching the sales process. The process is a series of repeatable steps that your sales teams make to convert prospects into customers.

For most modern organizations today, that process looks something like this:



A person converts on your website or receives a cold call from someone at your company.



They are asked a series of questions to determine a few crucial traits: Do they have the power at their company to make a decision? Do they have the budget to afford your solution? Do they even have a need for your product in the first place? Asking these questions qualifies a prospect into a viable sales lead.



Next, the qualified prospect is given a presentation of some kind. For high value transactions, sales reps often travel to the prospect's location to give a formal presentation. For many companies, sales reps can give live demos over the phone using computer screen sharing tools.



After the demo, the prospect offers the sales reps their objections: the price is too high, or they don't want to overhaul any of their processes, or this isn't a priority right now.



After all objections have been overcome, sales reps then "close" a prospect, creating new business.



After that, it's up to you to delight the customer, through another process that you've probably already established.

Once reps understand this process, they usually undergo a trial by fire, picking up tips from other reps along the way.

While the sales process is time-honored, proven, and effective, it doesn't teach reps how to account for the emotional factors within their prospects' buying journey.

So, while we don't recommend abandoning your trusty sales process, supplementing your existing sales training with targeted soft skills training could significantly boost your reps' emotional intelligence, resulting in increased revenue.

Let's look first at how we can define soft skills and emotional intelligence, and how they affect the sales process.

Soft Skills and Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the capacity for a person to:

- *Be aware of, control, and express their emotions*
- *Be aware of and understand the emotions of others*
- *Handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically*

Soft skills are personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people.

Thus, while soft skills and emotional intelligence are not one in the same, there is a lot of overlap between the two: soft skills can be acted on through the perceptions one makes via emotional intelligence, or their capacity to understand the motivations of people they communicate with.

As Eleanor Roosevelt famously said,

"To handle yourself, use your head; to handle others, use your heart."

Now that we've established a baseline, let's see how these traits enable salespeople to build stronger cases in their sales process.

Prospecting

It's in the prospecting stage that a lead makes their first decision: am I going to communicate with this sales rep?

Here are two different cold emails, one from someone who has a fair degree of emotional intelligence, and one who does not.

Let's go ahead and get the bad email out of the way.

----- Forwarded message -----

From: [REDACTED]
Date: Mon, Aug 7, 2017 at 2:45 PM
Subject: Re: Product Inquiry
To: [REDACTED]

Hi [REDACTED]

This email thread is like a metaphor for my life. So much potential but constantly being overlooked. *sigh* Self-deprecating humor for the win!

Reality check. If you are not leveraging voice and sms in your offering - you are falling behind the competition. If you already are - you are probably paying more than you should be. [REDACTED] could improve your customer experience while lowering costs. Thanks will come in the form of improved loyalty and higher margins.

Let's meet! It makes sense and I can explain it. The rest is entirely up to you. Will you meet with me this week?

All the best,
[REDACTED]

Yikes! Imagine being on the receiving end of this email – in fact, you've probably seen similarly distasteful emails. It attempts to invoke emotion with the phrase, "This email is like a metaphor for my life. So much potential but constantly being overlooked," but that kind of statement just makes the prospect feel awkward.

If your sales reps don't already know, make sure you let them know right now that a professional email to someone they've never met is not the place for self-deprecating humor.

It also relies on another emotion – fear: "Reality check. If you are not leveraging voice and sms in your offering – you are falling behind the competition."

Nobody wants to be told they're doing something wrong, and people especially don't want to hear that from a perfect stranger! Once rapport and trust have been established, you may bring up the prospect's competition, but don't try to start off the relationship using fear.

The email above is an example of a sales rep technically doing their job – they are prospecting, and they are reaching out, but the sales process is being blocked because they lack the emotional intelligence to understand how to **earn the prospect's attention**.

Now that that's out of the way, let's take a look at what a good sales email looks like, from a rep who displays a fair amount of emotional intelligence, perception, and communication aptitude.

Contributing to [REDACTED] ([REDACTED] referral) [REDACTED]



to [REDACTED]

12/13/16 ☆



Hey [REDACTED]

I've been loving the content coming out of the [REDACTED] blog for the past few months, especially the recent post about how to take a vacation that's meaningful—I know SO many people who cannot disconnect whatsoever.

One of my friends, [REDACTED] is a contributor to [REDACTED] and she recommended I reach out to you to see if it'd be a good fit for me to contribute to the blog as well. Right now, I typically cover topics related to side businesses, productivity, thoughtful entrepreneurship and finding meaningful work.

For some extra context, I write about my experiences and experiments on [my blog](#) where I have around 200k monthly readers and also contribute to Forbes, Buffer, Business Insider, Entrepreneur and others.

Let me know if this sounds interesting and I'd be happy to put together a few ideas on a piece we can test out!

[REDACTED]

Let's go over what works about this email – for starters, a **genuine** compliment always goes a long way when dealing with people, and this rep nails it right away – “I've been loving the content coming out of the [company] blog.”

The rep then predicts, probably correctly, that the next question the prospect has after gushing over the genuine compliment, is “Why is this person reaching out to me?” Right away, he answers this, saying that he was referred to the company by a friend.

Finally, he offers a call to action that doesn't require too much commitment from the prospect – “Let me know if this sounds interesting.”

Ultimately, what we have here is two people doing the same job. The first example demonstrates how a lack of soft skills can undermine prospecting efforts. In the second example, the soft skills evident in the writing suggest that this could be the start of a valuable business relationship.

Qualifying

The qualifying process is often the first time a sales rep and a prospect have a lengthy, meaningful conversation – this is like the first date.

At this point, the way your sales reps communicate is crucial – prospects are certainly evaluating your solution, but **they're also evaluating who they're working with.**

Does the sales rep actively listen? Do they seem to genuinely care? Do they answer the prospect's questions thoroughly?

Even if you're not asking these questions, you can be certain that the people your sales reps solicit are.

This is the stage where the empathy aspect of emotional intelligence becomes very clear – whether it's strong or lacking. Your reps need to be able to put themselves in their prospects' shoes.

Ensuring their soft skills are well-developed will help them lead more people through the qualifying process and set them up to win the sale.

Presentation and Handling Objections

A good sales presentation is largely about empathy. You want your sales reps to not only understand your prospect's pain points, but to feel those pain points.

Consumers make purchases because they believe the company they are buying from understands their needs.

When they're not quite sure you understand their problems, they begin presenting objections.

Objections are an expression of doubt. For instance, prospects will often object to the price of a solution if they doubt its value is greater than the cost of their problems.

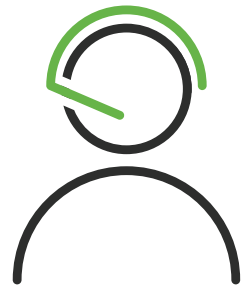
A savvy sales rep understands how to overcome these objections with emotional appeals.

For example, when a prospect objects to the price of a solution, a logical appeal would sound something like this:

"Sure, we may be more expensive than some of our competitors, but as with everything, you get what you pay for. We're better than X Competitor because their solution doesn't have Y Feature, which is proven to increase your ROI."

An emotional appeal, however, will sound something like this:

"You're absolutely right, we do have a slightly higher cost than some of our competitors, but our whole solution is predicated around saving you money on other marginal costs. Consider what else your company could invest in with the extra savings. What would you be able to do if you could save 15 percent of your distribution costs?"



Granted, the logical appeal does appear to overcome the objection, but it doesn't truly get the prospect's mind off the high price of the solution.

The emotional appeal invites the prospect to think about the bigger picture - what happens after the sale.

It is hard to hear "no," especially in sales, and an objection is essentially a long way of saying "no," or possibly "not yet." When sales reps can handle their own emotions and understand how to influence the emotions of others, they'll be able to overcome objections more effectively and increase your win rates.

Closing

Finally, when all objections have been overcome, and the prospect clearly understands the value of what you do, the sale must be closed.

Closing is perhaps the most “salesy” part of the sales process. Anyone can tell you that people love to buy things, but hate being sold to, which makes closing a sale a bit delicate.

Traditional sales training varies here, and there’s good information and not-as-good information.

Many sales training courses will tell reps to go for an “assumptive close,” which sounds something like this:

“So, when would you like to implement the solution?”

That approach can be successful, but it does come across as “salesy” for prospects who aren’t ready for a push quite yet.

A more empathetic way to approach a close would be to ask something that gives the prospect an out. This way, they don’t feel like they’re being pushed too hard.

We recommend something like:

“If we can solve your problems at a fair price, is there any reason that you wouldn’t do business with us?”

Implementing Soft Skills Training for Sales Growth

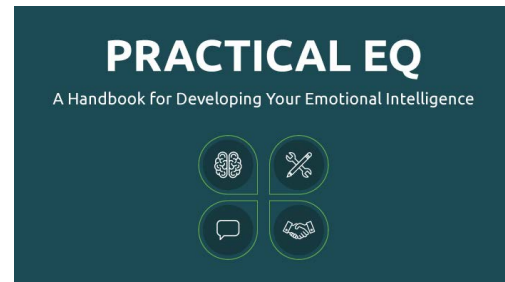
Part of your training program for sales reps should certainly cover sales-specific topics. For that kind of training, be sure to look for courses that encompass the sales process and the channels of communication that sales reps use – telephone skills, presentation skills, email etiquette, and any other communication channels you might use.

Also look for topics about other soft skills – how to be likable, making a great first impression, how to establish instant rapport, and other skills related to interpersonal relationships. Pair these emotional intelligence skills with training in problem solving and critical thinking, and you’ll have a team with a well-rounded set of skills that close more sales.

The great thing about soft skills training is that the benefits are not only limited to sales results. The influence of improved soft skills will have positive outcomes for the entire organization.

To get started implementing soft skills training in your company, check out these additional free resources:

Recommended Resources



SOURCES

<https://www.forentrepreneurs.com/bridge-group-2015/>

<https://www.technologyreview.com/s/528151/the-importance-of-feelings/>

<https://www.csoinsights.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/08/2016-Sales-Enablement-Optimization-Study.pdf>