

HOLDING EFFECTIVE SALES MEETINGS

There is no better way to communicate with the whole sales force than a well-run sales meeting. Unfortunately, in some firms, sales meetings are mismanaged activities, used by sales management to deliver the wrong messages. Strout (2000) stresses that in today's bottom line driven marketplace, sales meetings must do more than just energize and educate. They must achieve results.

Holding regular Friday afternoon sales meetings conveys the message that the sales manager does not trust his sales staff and defeats the idea that sales meetings are important activities and sources of vital information. Farr (2000) advises today's manager to free up this time to encourage client socializing. A Friday afternoon game of golf, tennis or squash with a client will invariably provide higher payoffs in business and heightened sales force morale. This is not to say meetings are not necessary. The sales managers should base meetings on need and make them worthwhile to attend.

Meetings should be held only for important reasons – to announce rewards, hold celebrations, discuss operational changes, set goals and strategies, and make announcements. Sales meetings can be held at the district, regional or national levels. Sales managers should determine what topics are most appropriate for each meeting. Sometimes two or three topics must compete for top billing. For instance, a company wanting to discuss the merits of instituting a dress code for salespeople would be advised to discuss it at smaller, more intimate district meetings. Topics like the closing of a regional warehouse may be put off to another time or passed to a sales managers' meeting. Here are some meeting themes that establish a productive tone:

Goal-setting. At least once a year, the sales force of the region, or the whole country, should be brought together for the purpose of establishing concrete goals for the upcoming year. This should not be confused with the process of setting individual performance objectives. Care must also be taken to distinguish between training and information sharing. Sales meetings are a forum for sharing information with others and should not be used to change attitudes or shape behaviour – topics that are better suited to individual and small group training sessions. The goal-setting meeting should involve sales personnel in an exercise to develop or confirm the goals of the organization. A meeting whose sole purpose is to announce goals is hardly worthwhile when the same goal can be accomplished by an email. Providing an opportunity for active participation is a valid reason to meet.

New product knowledge. From time to time, most organizations make changes to their product lines. Sales meetings can be used to inform the sales force about technical specification changes, style additions, design modifications and line expansions or contractions. The key issue is how to make such meetings relevant

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and interesting so that participants feel part of the process rather than mere attendees. One packaged goods company uses part of every sales meeting to put its salespeople through a structured process designed to find new product forms, colours, styles, packages, etc. Salespeople value the opportunity to give advice, and are motivated to participate when they see many of their recommendations implemented.

Market and territory changes. Salespeople want to be part of the change process when management contemplates moving sales representatives from one assignment to another. Some sales managers feel strongly that organizational change must remain the prerogative of management. This need not mean that the sales force is not consulted. Part of the market change process may involve some one-way communication about changes to demographics, size of accounts, client ownership or recommendations on call scheduling. However, salespeople should be encouraged to contribute ideas on any significant changes to territory design or credit for company clients. Sales staff have innovative ideas to contribute; if they are not given a hearing, they may be turned off. A non-involved sales force will be a non-motivated sales force.

Sales skills update. It is best to include discussions about sales skills in some sales meetings to ensure that all team members receive the same exposure to new topics. Managers should consider developing a year-long agenda of topics incorporating fundamental skills as well as controversial approaches that will encourage representatives to reflect on their selling roles. Here is an agenda for a six-month period of sales meetings that should create interest: key account management, new closing strategies, improving your public speaking, legal aspects of selling, dealing with difficult customers, web selling challenges, and the power of praise. Many companies bring in outside speakers to cover these topics and create interest.

Corporate policy changes. There is some controversy as to whether changes in corporate policies should be dealt with in sales meetings or kept separate from selling issues. In some larger firms, corporate policies take such precedence over division and department matters that much of the sales meeting agenda is taken up with policy discussions. But policy matters tend to distract from the important reasons sales representatives have been brought together as a team. Sales managers should avoid building sales meetings around company policy discussions. Instead, they should use recent policy directives as a framework in which sales topics are presented. A new company policy on vehicle reimbursement is highly relevant to salespeople, whereas 'capital budget limitations for environmental test control equipment' is not.

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Key Features of Successful Sales Meetings	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Shorter rather than longer✓ Prepared in advance✓ Has structured agenda✓ Attendees know meeting purpose✓ Topics are interesting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Speakers are knowledgeable✓ Seating is comfortable✓ Refreshments are available✓ Leader is in full control✓ Summary notes are provided

Organize for Success

Whatever the theme, managers organizing sales meetings should follow these basic rules:

- ✓ Meetings should not interfere with prime selling time and be scheduled for late afternoon.
- ✓ Set a well-structured agenda that leaves no doubt as to what will be discussed and what sales management expects of the representatives attending.
- ✓ Agendas should be distributed well in advance of the meeting, with requests for any adjustment or additions made to the meeting scheduler directly. Make extra copies available at the meeting.
- ✓ Be sure to say what sales objectives will be addressed at the meeting so representatives can prepare to contribute in a positive way. In a follow-up memo, encourage all contributions.
- ✓ On the final draft of the agenda, outline how much time each item on the agenda should take; for example, automobile insurance – ten minutes. Do not make the agenda so tight that it stifles discussion and prevents representatives from commenting.
- ✓ At meeting's end, summarize what has been accomplished and what changes (if any) have been made to the sales objectives of the department or company.

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Characteristics of Disastrous Sales Meetings That Accomplish Nothing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Lack a published agenda ✓ Meeting set in uncomfortable room ✓ All participants are criticized ✓ Technology breaks down ✓ No positive feedback is provided ✓ Meeting is held on a Friday afternoon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Key issues are avoided ✓ Refreshments are not provided ✓ Meeting organizer does all the talking ✓ Policies on cut-backs are announced ✓ Meeting is prolonged ✓ Breaks are not scheduled

Special Types of Sales Meetings

Sales managers have a golden opportunity to include discussions about sales skills and actual sales training activities within their sales meetings. Such opportunities should not be overlooked as the sales meeting format is one of the key avenues through which all team members receive the same exposure to new topics. Managers should consider developing a year-long agenda of topics incorporating fundamental skills as well as controversial approaches that will encourage representatives to reflect on their selling roles. Listed below are some thought-provoking subjects for training your sales team that can be covered in about 30 minutes to one hour:

Sales Meeting Topics	
Product/Industry Knowledge	Prospecting Techniques
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sources for Product Information ✓ Distribution in Our Industry ✓ How to Use Supplier's Aids (e.g. website) ✓ Company Policies on [insert subject] ✓ Who Are Our Competitors/Suppliers/Customers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Where to Source Prospects? ✓ How to Identify and Find Your Best Customers? ✓ Finding the Decision-maker ✓ Qualifying Prospects ✓ Dealing with Multiple Decision-makers

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ What Services Are Being Sold? ✓ How and When to Quote Prices/Discounts? ✓ Applications of a Specific Product to [insert industry/service] Sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Developing a Telephone Script ✓ Cold Calling Techniques ✓ Getting Referrals
Consultative Sales Visit	Sales Presentations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Preparing for the Interview ✓ Researching the Prospect ✓ Sales Questions to Ask ✓ Initial Call Objectives ✓ Opening the Visit ✓ Determining Needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Planning the Presentation ✓ Elements of the Proposal/Presentation ✓ Sales Demonstrations ✓ Using Visual Aids/Web Conferencing/LCD and Laptops ✓ Team Presentations
Handling Buyer's Concerns	Gaining Commitment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ How to Prevent Objections ✓ Determining the Real Reason Behind an Objection ✓ Changing Objections into Questions ✓ Overcoming Price Objections ✓ Handling the "I want to think about it" Concern 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Trial Closes and Asking for the Sale ✓ Dealing with "Yes" and "No" ✓ Recognizing Buying Signals ✓ Valuing Your Services
After-sales Follow-up	Customer Relationship Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Servicing the Sales Strategies ✓ Entertaining Customers ✓ Building Repeat Sales ✓ Converting the Occasional Buyer into a Regular Customer ✓ Up selling and Cross-selling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Introducing Price Increases ✓ Company Pricing and Discount Policies ✓ How to Handle Discount Competition ✓ Reinforcing Customer Value ✓ Account Reviews

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Time/Territory Management	Miscellaneous Topics
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Planning for Short and Long-range Success✓ Breaking Down Sales Targets✓ Return on Time Invested in Your Territory✓ Time Management Tactics✓ Sales Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Legal Aspects of Selling✓ Web Selling Challenges✓ Sales Ethics

Topics for sales meetings naturally come from objectives which provide their own subjects and topics. As sales manager looking for fresh subject matter and sales approached to maintain your sales meeting momentum, you can also check out websites on selling, sales management and marketing, professional associations and their professional development offerings, e-newsletters for tips and ideas.