

Part Three: Product Training

Are you onboarding your salespeople correctly?

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Editor's Note: This is the third of a five-part series. The first two parts, "Part One: Train to Outcomes" and "Part Two: The First 90 Days," appear in the September and October 2021 issues of Office Technology.

Each of your salespeople must believe in what he (or she) sells. When a person believes in something strongly enough, he becomes passionate about it and then wants to shout it from the rooftops. He wants to share it with everyone he meets. He becomes an evangelical minister and a product ambassador.

We achieve this objective by proving that your products matter, they make a difference and your salespeople are proud to share them with their current and new customers. This will fuel your reps to do those extra cold calls, face their fears and accept rejection. Your goal is to get your salespeople to believe in the products you have for them to sell. Belief in your products comes from well-executed product training.

So where do we begin when it comes to product training? In the third part of this five-part series, we will dive into the four key areas of training needed to create passion and excitement around the products your salespeople represent:

- (1) The history of each product's evolution
- (2) Understanding which features solve customer challenges
- (3) Mastering the product demonstration
- (4) Clarity in the competitive landscape

In this article, we will highlight how to properly incorporate these critical and often overlooked areas of product training into your sales onboarding process.

The History of Each Product's Evolution

They say history gives us perspective on the present. By knowing the history of something, we can better appreciate what we have grown accustomed to today.

Take music, for example. Not too long ago, we could only listen to music on records from the comfort of our homes.



Then CDs were invented and we could listen to music in our cars and on portable CD players. Then the internet boom happened, followed by pirated music from Napster, which was then legitimized with iTunes and digitally formatted music. Today, we just choose the mood we are in and artificial intelligence on Spotify, Amazon Music or Apple Music will find the right musical fit for us.

The evolution of music logically shows us how it evolved by solving natural challenges people were looking to fix. With records to CDs, people were looking to bring music with them. With CDs to digital files, they were looking to have larger libraries and quicker access to certain songs. With artificial intelligence, they were looking to explore other types of music that were similar to ones they already enjoyed. There are still people today who only listen to music on CDs or are just beginning to trust Apple Music to host their purchased album libraries. People adjust to the evolution of products in their own time frames. Sometimes they do it out of necessity and other times because they just did not know there was a better way.

Our technology works the same way. The updates that have been made to office technology products over the years are substantial. A 2010 version of an office machine compared to a 2021 version is like a record player versus having Amazon Music. The beauty of our industry is that customers typically have 60-month contracts and often take used machines as well. That means it is normal to be upgrading technology that has evolved considerably over the past few years. It is all about perspective.

You must make sure that your salespeople understand the evolution of your product line. They need to know just as much about the older machines as they do the new ones. They need to be able to clearly state the differences and what the new version has that the ones before did not. People will buy your products for many reasons and not all of your customers have the latest models. Why would they “transition to Apple Music” if they do not understand how it could benefit their companies and the way they support their own customers?

Understanding Which Features Solve Customer Challenges

When our salespeople meet with customers, they reek of commission breath. It is all about them and how they desperately want to sell one of their products. It is the same as if they are asking a customer: “Do you want to buy a new machine?”

The natural thing for a customer to do is to keep his guard up. He does not want to commit to needing anything and opening his wallet for a new product. He will, however, talk about the technology challenges he is facing. These challenges have direct financial impacts that could be getting in the way of his company’s growth. There is frustration and pain involved with these challenges. Even more, the customer has no idea if there is a better way to do things when it comes to his technology.

This is where we need to train our salespeople to become more comfortable with having conversations around the common challenges our customers could be facing, especially considering there are features that our products have that were invented to solve those specific challenges. It is easier said than done. Asking good questions, and following them up with more specific drill-down questions, is an advanced sales skill and not easy to learn.

Here is a method I recommend using to teach your salespeople how to better understand their clients by connecting features to challenges they are facing. It is called FCIQ and stands for features, challenges, impact and questions. Here is how it works:

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■ **Features:** Start with one feature you know is important on the new model or service you provide. Write it down on a piece of paper.

■ **Challenges:** Ask yourself what challenges customers could be experiencing if they did not have this feature or service today? List as many possible challenges as you can.

■ **Impact:** If customers do not solve these challenges, what will be the financial impact on their businesses? How will they be affected?

■ **Questions:** Now that you understand the challenges and impacts to your customers’ businesses, look back at what you wrote under the challenges section and come up with questions you could ask to determine if they are experiencing those challenges.

Following this method requires your salespeople to brainstorm answers along the way. This will result in a deeper understanding of how each feature solves real problems for their clients. The more they understand, the more comfortable they will feel having conversations about the challenges in front of their customers.

These conversations will lead to customers who want to see validation that the solutions to their problems exist on your technology. This natural progression leads customers to product demos.

Mastering the Product Demonstration

It is embarrassing how often the demonstration is purposely skipped within the sales process. “The customer doesn’t need to see the new technology. They’re good. They just want to see a quote.” These are famous last words and validation that you are OK with fighting the price war game. If you want an immediate improvement in profit margins and win rates, make a product demonstration mandatory before any proposal is given to a customer.

Statistically speaking, in our industry, we have an 80% close rate on any proposal that had first seen a demo — and that is on the low end. If this is the case across the country, why are salespeople still skipping demos? I find there are two potential reasons.

The first is that a salesperson is relying on someone else to do the demo for him. It could be a manager, a specialist or a service technician. If this person is not available, the sales rep just moves past the demo in order to not slow down the sales cycle. This is a big mistake.

The other reason is that a sales rep may not feel comfortable doing the demo himself. This is what we need to focus on in terms of sales training for our people. Each rep must know how to do a demo on a whim. He should know how

to customize his demo script and make sure it brings the customer's current situation to life — so if the customer uses your technology, he ends up in a better situation. The demo should prove that there are solutions to the customer's problems. It should prove that your company is the right long-term partner for his business.

The best way to teach our salespeople how to do incredible demonstrations is to start from a demo script that you design. The demos that shine are the ones that wow customers by showcasing every solution in your portfolio — like production color, software workflow solutions, security add-ons, managed print services and managed IT services that connect everything together. You need to demonstrate this yourself to show your people what great looks like. Finish up with a memorized certification. Let your reps know that you expect greatness from them in order to move on to the next step.

The demonstration is the culmination of excellent product training. Take your time to do this part correctly. It is not uncommon for this to be a weeklong section of product training with the final day being the demo certification.

Clarity in the Competitive Landscape

The advanced part of product training is learning about the competition. We have many different manufacturers in our industry and the worst thing a salesperson can believe is that “they are all the same.” They must learn about the strengths and weaknesses of their competitors. I have seen the “battle cards” that manufacturers create for their dealers and although they seem to have some wisdom, they are easily forgotten.

In my earliest days at Xerox, I was sent to Leesburg, Virginia, for product training. The most impactful part of the training was when we went to Xerox's competitive lab. The competitive lab was a room filled with new equipment purchased from every competitor we were up against. We spent time testing out basic functionality across the different providers. How did they all copy? How did they all print? How did they all scan? It was shocking to see how they all behaved differently. They were clearly not the same.

The experience made me want to open up the competitors' products. I was comfortable with them and wanted to see the differences on my home turf. I ultimately created a competitive lab of my own in our warehouse during my tenure at Mr. Copy. I recommend you consider doing the same for your salespeople.

To do this, I arranged for any owned competitive gear (not promised to be returned to a financing company) to be stored

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in one part of our warehouse. I would take our salespeople to this area and we would open up the competitive products, make observations and do tests. This was incredibly valuable, as it reinforced my message that not all features function the same way.

There is power in knowing where you stand and how your products are separated from the rest of the pack. You need to bring that out into the open for your salespeople and send them on quests to

constantly search for those competitive advantages and lockouts, and proactively introduce them into their sales cycles.

The Product Is the Differentiator, Not the Salesperson

Product training done right can set your salespeople down the path toward long-term success. On top of the obvious speeds and feeds memorization, it is critical to incorporate these four areas into your normal training process to ensure they will believe in what they are selling.

Without a belief in your products, a salesperson will end up believing he is the differentiator in the sales process. He will think customers are buying because of him since a “copier is just a copier.” This ends in price wars, because customers who cannot tell the difference between products, not seeing what makes your salesperson's product special and unique, will go with the lowest price. The product is the differentiator, not the salesperson.

In my next article, we will continue with part four of five, “How to Sell Training,” and go in-depth on what I recommend you include inside the sales fundamentals portion of the onboarding process. Learning how to sell will help salespeople believe in themselves and build up their confidence to become top sales performers. ■

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