"An Analysis of Topical Training Areas Perceived as Desirable by Sales Managers"

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Abstract

The results of responses from 296 sales managers surveyed on topical areas perceived as significant enough to be covered in training programs are analyzed. Based on the respondents' evaluations of a set of topical areas whereby they were asked to indicate the importance of training topics, an analysis is provided across relevant segments and implications drawn. There were relatively little differences in the perceived importance of training topics between sales managers of both industrial and consumer goods as well as large and small sized companies. However, numerous differences of the importance of perceived training topical areas are reported across the career life cycle stages of the sales force.

Introduction

The decision of what topics to cover in sales training is a crucial consideration for sales managers. This sales management responsibility involves numerous choices, trade offs and costs. (Wotruba & Simpson, 1992). Often, a critical determinant of the success of sales managers is the quality of the training program which they provide for members of their sales forces. Likewise, training is of special significance to the salespeople. The decision by management regarding who gets trained in what potentially impacts salespeople throughout their careers. In fact, regardless of career stages, a key for sales success in the 1990s involves more than traditional selling skills; salespeople, it seems, must be true professionals. (Younger, 1992). Sales professionalism depends on how successful salespeople are at establishing long-term relationships with customers and such efforts demand time, energy and dedication. (Callahan, 1992), (Dwyer, Schurr, & Sejo, 1987), (Spekman & Johnston, 1986). In light of these job challenges, sales managers must continuously address the appropriateness of training programs.

An important ingredient in the design of training programs is the selection of a mix of topical areas to be covered. One of the major reasons that training programs fail is that they are not focused on what the trainees specifically need to learn or improve. (Oliver, 1987). The programs can encompass a variety of topics, including company products, company policies, how to sell, competitor products, competitor policies, company strengths and weaknesses, company marketing strategies,

territory management, and others. Covering each of these has specific advantages and disadvantages and assumes more significance in some companies and industries than in others.

Given the importance of training programs, it is surprising to find that little empirical research has been published on this issue. One study involving large American companies reported on five subject areas, expressed as a percentage of training time dedicated to each area, considered essential in selling. (Honeycutt & Harris, 1987). However, most of the literature relating to the selection of topical areas is based upon personal experience, observation, and logic, rather than upon empirical data. (Gowley, 1986), (Schaaf & Cotharan, 1988). Both textbooks and periodicals are of this nature. This field has not yet received substantial attention by researchers. However, it seems reasonable that some topical areas are of more significance and should be stressed in training programs more than others. Sales managers focus on particular topical areas, as they learn the amount of stress that should be placed upon each one. This is an important element of the process of gaining experience. One possible means of assessing the desirability of covering the various topical areas is to ask sales managers for their perceptions on this question. That technique was incorporated in the research study described here.

Survey of the Literature

The sales management literature has dealt with the subject of topical training areas. According to Levitt the training job starts in two places: (1) with the concept that sales training must be part of the entire marketing effort and (2) with the process of analyzing and defining a given task to determine all the details that affect the sale. (Reed, 1988). With reference to this latter point, Lorenzen has related that sales training should focus on questioning skills, strategy, and the process, not merely answering objections and practicing closes. (Lorenzen, 1986). His contention is that effective selling has evolved to a stage where questioning and analysis of customer needs has replaced the presentation as the most important step in the sales process. Segall indicates that initial training topics that will make sales representatives more receptive to subsequent training should be selected. (Segall, 1986). In essence, she advocates training as a prerequisite to further training.

Some observers of sales management trends have suggested specific topical areas for training. Atkinson indicates that sales people should understand their company's products, the customer's buying organization, the customer's products, the customer's requirements, and the customer's markets. (Atkinson, 1989). Van Rycke states that salespeople need to be taught administrative as well as selling skills, including records management, report writing, sales analysis, and sales forecasting. (Van Rycke, 1985).

Some research studies have provided insights into sales training topics. Murphy examined the opinions and practices of marketing executives at U.S. freight railroads. According to the respondents the content of sales force training should be selling and operations. The study indicated that those firms who focused on operations and service in their training programs tended to be more profitable. (Murphy, 1988). A parallel study of general freight carriers in the trucking industry indicated that the carriers' sales training efforts emphasized selling, pricing, and operations. (Murphy, 1987).

Kerr and Burzynski conducted a survey of 235 executives who were responsible for sales training in their companies. The survey indicated that training programs in the respondent's companies focused on skills and knowledge, rather than on attitudes. This was despite the fact that the respondents indicated that attitudes were more important than skills and knowledge in producing sales success. (Kerr & Burzynski, 1988).

Ruhl and Atkinson conducted a study of the sales training programs of Lanier Business Systems. They found that the programs covered products, territories, customers and techniques for beginning sales representatives, with follow-up sessions six months later. The

follow-up sessions focused on steps in their personal selling process, particularly handling customer objections. (Ruhl & Atkinson, 1986).

One of the areas which this paper explores is the relationship of the sales career life cycle to the desirability of topical training areas. A number of studies have found the career life cycle to be a significant determinant of the success of sales management strategies and tactics. The literature on the career life cycle is extensive. Several articles exemplify this rich literature base.

(Jolson, 1974) first noted that sales representative motivation will vary according to age and amount of experience. He provided a framework to help understand how salespersons' approach to work is likely to change over time. According to this author, a salesperson's performance resembled the four stages of the classic s-shaped curve of the product life cycle.

(Cron's, 1984) framework also consists of four stages. The are: (1) exploration (2) establishment (3) maintenance and (4) disengagement. In addition to these four stages, he focused on certain career concerns, development tasks, personal challenges and psychological needs of salespeople.

(Hafer, 1986) investigated this career stage phenomenon and one of his findings indicated that performance changes over time. For example, he found that a salesperson's performance increases most rapidly during the establishment stage.

(Dalrymple and Strahle, 1990) addressed "career path charting" as an important aspect to be included in their proposed framework for sales force evaluation. They surveyed a national sales force of 56 people in the building products industry and found that territory sales increased with sales force experience. Furthermore, these authors suggested that managers use a "performance matrix" to review and compare salespeople. By including the age of the employees in the matrix, managers can track career paths of salespeople and highlight differences in calls and growth rates across performance levels.

(Weeks and Kahle, 1990) attempted to determine the extent to which the relationship between time spent calling on established or potential accounts and performance varied by career stage. These authors define career stage by age and they employed (Cron's, 1984) framework in their study.

As (Honeycutt, Howe and Ingram, 1993) highlighted, many firms do not utilize a systematic set of objectives in their sales training. The researchers conducted an investigation to determine the extent to which sales

training objectives are employed in training programs. Their findings suggest that many firms allow one individual or functional area to set goals and that these goal setters often fail to seek input from experienced sales people. In addition, companies often set general rather than specific objectives for each training program.

In sum, effective sales training programs designed by managers may depend on the career stages of their salespeople. All salespeople do not need the same kind of training; their career stages may be an important determinant of the program content.

Objectives

The objectives of the inquiry outlined in this paper were as follows: (1) To assess the desirability of covering various topical areas, based upon self-reports of a sample of sales managers. (2) To assess the desirability of covering various topical areas among sales managers of (a) small and (b) large companies. Because of differences in the responsibilities of sales representatives, resources available to them, and marketing strategies among large and small firms, it was hypothesized that these two types of organizations would favor different topical areas. (3) To assess the desirability of covering various topical areas among sales managers at different levels of sales representative stage in the career life cycle. As the previous section illustrated, the literature has suggested the need for different types of training at diverse points in the career life cycle. This proposition has considerable face validity and has important implications for sales managers.

Some reasonable degree of satisfaction of the three objectives would be potentially advantageous to sales managers. It would furnish insights needed for the development and refinement of new and existing training programs, in light of the specific needs of the firm.

The Study

Questionnaires were forwarded to eight hundred sales managers employed by manufacturing firms who were listed in the membership directory of the American Marketing Association. A follow-up postcard was mailed to each sales manager, requesting participation in the study, five days after the initial mailing. This effort generated a sample size of 201. A second set of questionnaires and another wave of postcards were sent to the nonrespondents, producing 95 additional completed questionnaires and a total sample size of 296. Sixty two percent of the sales manager respondents worked for consumer goods and thirty eight for industrial goods companies. Seventy one percent were employed by large and twenty nine percent by small firms.

The questionnaires asked the respondents to evaluate

the desirability of covering 14 topical areas in their sales training programs on a five point scale, ranging from "very desirable" to "very undesirable". The term "desirable" was defined as producing knowledge, attitudes, and behavior on the part of sales representatives which would enable them to best contribute to company goals. The scale values ran from 1 ("very desirable" to 5 "very undesirable"). Thus lower values reflect more positive feelings, on the part of the respondents, than do higher values. Table one presents the topical areas which appeared on the questionnaire. These were elicited from a review of seven sales management textbooks and encompassed all of the topical areas mentioned in these texts, so the listing is believed to be all-inclusive. In addition to the overall assessment of the 14 topical areas, the respondents were asked to evaluate the desirability of each topical area for representatives in each of the four stages of the sales career life cycle: (a) preparation (b) achievement, (c) maturity, and (d) decline. (Jolson, 1974). Each stage was explained in the questionnaire, as means of enhancing accurate assignment.

In order to permit comparisons between large and small companies, the respondents were asked to specify the number of individuals employed by their firms. They were also requested to indicate if they were primarily a consumer or an industrial goods company. Definitions of these two type of firms were furnished.

The questionnaire was pretested through 20 sales managers in the city where the researchers are employed. The pretest respondents reviewed an initial questionnaire and suggested various improvements. After reviewing a revised questionnaire they indicated that the measuring instrument enabled them to effectively communicate their perceptions about the training topics. In addition, they reported that the process of evaluating topics was reasonably efficient and not overly difficult. They agreed that the listing of training topics which was printed on the questionnaire was all inclusive - they were not aware of topics other than those included in the questionnaire.

Findings

Table 1 presents the training topics which appeared on the questionnaire, the mean scale values provided by the respondents and the means of each column in the table (column means). It includes mean scale values for the sample at large and for consumer goods and industrial goods firms. The table labels those mean square values which were significantly smaller than the column mean for all 14 scales plus the "other" scale in the appropriate column with an asterisk. A "Tukey test" was applied to determine which mean scale values were significantly lower than their column means. In column one, for example, the asterisk indicates that the mean

Table 1

Mean Scale Values of the Desirability of Sales Training Topics			
Sales Training Topic	Mean Scale Value		
	Total Sample	Consumer Goods	Industrial Goods
Company Products	1.11*	1.19*	1.05*
Company Policies	1.27*	1.42*	1.11*
How to Sell	1.29*	1.20*	1.37*
Competitor Products	1.30*	1.43*	1.19*
Competitor Policies	1.58*	1.69*	1.46*
Company Strengths & Weaknesses	1.73*	1.57*	1.83*
Company Marketing Strategy	1.95*	1.77*	2.16*
Territory Management	2.38	2.84	1.91*
Motivation to Sell	2.51	1.95*	3.02
Positive Attitudes Toward Firm	2.77	3.48	1.99*
Financial Analysis	2.96	3.15	2.98
Legal Matters	3.44	3.40	3.49
Time Management	3.48	3.31	3.62
Listening	3.91	3.80	4.00
Other	3.98	4.24	3.72
Column Means	2.38	2.43	2.33

*Denotes mean scale values that are significantly smaller than the mean scale value of the column, according to a Tukey K test at the .05 level. Tukey K tests indicate if individual means are significantly smaller than the mean of the means.

scale value for "company products" (1.17) is significantly smaller than the column mean (2.61). This suggests that the sales managers considered "company products" to be a desirable topic for their training efforts.

According to the table the training topics which were perceived to be the most desirable by the overall sample are company products, company policies, how to sell, competitor products, competitor policies, company strengths and weaknesses, and company marketing strategy. The mean scale values for all of these variables are significantly lower than the mean scale value for the column. Since they are lower they indicate that these topics are more desirable than others according to the sample. These are all traditional and time-proven topical areas. Other topics which approach but do not

attain significance are territory management and motivation to sell.

An examination of columns two and three reveals that there is considerable similarity between the relative mean scale evaluations for consumer and industrial goods sales managers. Several exceptions to this pattern are evident, however. In the case of consumer goods, motivation to sell shows significance. This is not the situation for industrial goods. On the other hand, territory management and positive attitudes toward the firm are significant for industrial but not for consumer goods. Overall, the correlation between consumer and industrial goods values is high. The Pearson Product Moment coefficient of correlation is .81, which is significant at the .05 level, indicating substantial agree-

Table 2

Mean Scale Values of Sales Training Topical Areas Perceived to be Important to Respondents by Size of Firm		
Topical Area	Size of the Firm	
	Small	Large
Company Products	1.17*	1.05*
Company Policies	1.46*	1.08*
How to Sell	1.46*	1.12*
Competitor Products	1.22*	1.39*
Competitor Policies	1.35*	1.81*
Company Strengths & Weaknesses	1.92*	1.93*
Company Marketing Strategy	2.09	1.83*
Territory Management	2.65	2.11
Motivation to Sell	2.79	2.23
Positive Attitudes Toward Firm	3.16	2.30
Financial Analysis	3.52	2.39
Legal Matters	3.96	2.95
Time Management	3.80	3.16
Listening	4.48	3.24
Other	4.05	3.91
Column Means	2.61	2.17

*Denotes mean scale values that are significantly smaller than the mean scale value of the column, according to a Tukey K test at the .05 level.

ment between the two groups as to the relative desirability of the various topical areas.

It is notable that three topics- listening, time management, and legal matters - which receive considerable attention in the training and general sales management literature, received low ratings from the respondents, compared to the other topics. Rather than evaluating these as more desirable, the sales managers provided desirable ratings for more traditional "bread and butter" topics such as company product and company policy knowledge.

Table 2 sets forth the mean scale values for the topical training areas, classified according to the size of the firm which employed the sales managers. Those with 100 employees or less were classified as small and those with more than 100 as large. Small company sales managers gave the "most desirable" ratings to company products, competitor products, competitor policies, company policies, how to sell, and company strengths and weaknesses. For large firms the most desirable ratings were for company products, company policies, how to sell, competitor products, competitor policies, company marketing strategy, and company strengths and weaknesses.

Table 3

Mean Scale Values of Sales Training Topical Areas Perceived to be Important to Respondents by Stage in the Career Life Cycle				
Topical Area	Stage in Career Life Cycle			
	Preparation	Achievement	Maturity	Decline
Company Products	1.06*	1.07*	1.16*	1.17*
Company Policies	1.05*	1.09*	1.45*	1.51*
How to Sell	1.01*	1.01*	1.57*	1.63*
Competitor Products	1.07*	1.08*	1.46*	1.54*
Competitor Polices	1.12*	1.49*	1.68*	2.05*
Company Strengths & Weaknesses	1.15*	1.24*	2.21	2.33
Company Marketing Strategy	1.72	1.80	2.09*	2.19*
Territory Management	1.99	1.97	2.70	2.78
Motivation to Sell	2.39	2.44	2.59	2.65
Positive Attitudes Toward Firm	2.46	2.59	2.98	3.02
Financial Analysis	2.21	2.37	4.05	4.74
Legal Matters	2.45	2.63	3.71	4.49
Time Management	2.61	2.54	4.42	4.37
Listening	3.72	3.72	4.01	4.16
Other	3.66	3.79	4.30	4.22
Column Means	1.98	2.06	2.70	2.86

*Denotes mean scale values that are significantly smaller than the mean scale value of the column, according to a Tukey K test at the .05 level.

The relative evaluations for the two groups were very similar except that larger firm sales managers gave company marketing strategy a significant mean scale value, while small firm managers did not. The coefficient of correlation between the two groups is .80, which is significant at the .05 level. Thus, it appears that the two groups are closely correlated.

Table 3 sets forth the mean scale values for the four stages in the career life cycle. An examination of the table reveals that the ratings of desirability are higher for earlier than for later stages in the cycle. This is presumably due to the need for extensive training early in the cycle. Still, as the table reveals, sales managers view a number of topics as desirable for coverage in

later stages.

Asterisks identify mean scale values that are significantly greater than their column means. There is some consistency in ratings across cycle stages, but numerous differences are apparent. In the preparation stage how to sell, company policies, company products, competitor products, competitor policies, and company strengths and weaknesses are all significant. During the achievement stage the most highly rated topical areas are how to sell, company products, competitor products, and company policies. For the maturity stage the most highly rated topical areas are company products, company policies, competitor products, how to sell, competitor policies, and company marketing strategy. In the first two stages company strengths and weaknesses are significant, indicating management's desire to impart knowledge about fundamental company attributes to members of the sales force. On the other hand, company marketing strategy is a significant topical area for the latter two stages. In this case, sales managers are apparently attempting to keep representatives apprised on the major directions the marketing unit is taking.

Summary and Conclusions

The study described herein was designed to measure sales manager perceptions of the desirability of covering various topical areas in sales training programs. Seven topical areas- company products, company policies, how to sell, competitor products, competitor policies, company strengths and weaknesses, and company marketing strategy emerged as significant. When comparisons between consumer and industrial goods managers were made, differences in evaluation were found, although there was considerable consistency between the two groups. The correlation between the two was statistically significant. Since both groups agreed to the extent that they did, this lends credibility to the research findings.

Comparisons were made between large and small firm sales managers. The groups manifested similarities in ratings of topical areas but differed in a number of respects. Larger firms rated more topical areas as effective than did their smaller counterparts, probably reflecting their more extensive training programs. Many smaller firms do not have the resources needed to provide training on topics other than their basic needs. Larger companies tend to be more endowed in this respect.

The data were cross classified according to stages in the career life cycle. Despite some consistency, a number of differences in evaluation were apparent. The major differences were between the first two steps, on the one hand, and the latter two, on the other. Overall, the desirability ratings were higher for earlier stages in

the cycle. This reflects sales manager perception of the need for substantial training of new and less-experienced representatives. The earlier stages generally focus on company strengths and weaknesses, whereas the latter stages tend to emphasize strategy.

Based upon the results of this study, several conclusions are appropriate. One is that the members of the sample clearly showed a preference for seven specific topical areas. It would appear that sales managers should consider these as candidates for an integral part of their training programs. On the other hand, breakdowns by consumer and industrial goods, size of firm, and stage in the career life cycle indicate that different topical areas may be appropriate, depending upon the status of the company as regards these and possibly other variables. Conceivably, other variables could intervene, bringing about the need for diversions from common patterns, in the case of individual firms. These other variables could include marketing strategies and tactics, company policy, competitive structure of the industry, and customer preferences. The strong impact of the choice of topical areas on the success of the sales training program dictates that considerable care be taken in making decisions on topical areas.

Additionally, a noteworthy consideration deserves highlighting. Although listening, (as one of the three topics reported earlier), received low ratings from the respondents, compared to the other topics, some current research efforts report poor listening skills as one of the six most significant factors contributing to salespeople failure. (Ingram, 1992) The results of this study are inconsistent with that conclusion. It is conceivable that some sales managers view listening as a skill which is difficult to instill through training programs. Some may feel that they can engender this skill by encouraging its development by individual sales representatives acting on their own, rather than through formal training programs. The topic of lack of interest in focusing training programs on listening skills is of sufficient importance to merit further research.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research projects could be of value in extending the usefulness of the insights uncovered in this study. Research into the topical training areas desired by low tech, as compared to high tech firms could be of value. Also useful would be a survey of sales representative feelings about the desirability of various topical training areas. Useful comparisons with the results of the present study might emerge. Another interesting study would be to compare topical training areas in an international setting--contrasting U.S. companies with those in other nations.

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