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Boston Business Journal – by Keith Regan Special to the Journal

By Keith Regan

special to the journal No matter how experienced or successful, almost any salesman can benefit from well-designed training.

"Like anyone who is elite in their field, training is what made them great and what keeps them great," says Joe Ippolito, president of Sandler Training in Beverly.

Great athletes not only have coaches and managers to motivate and drive them, but trainers to work on specific skills, he notes. "If they don't, someone will take their job. In the same way, a well-trained salesperson will outsell an untrained salesperson and steal your business."

While many salesmen may feel that sales training is "a waste of time," that is largely because many programs are not well designed or don't address the real problem in an organization, says **Reed Holden**, president of Holden Advisors in Concord, which advises companies on sales and pricing strategies.

Training can be anything but a waste of time if it's done right, with the right firm and the right approach that actually addresses the issues an organization faces.

"Senior executives recognize the need for a solution and they say, 'Let's train people,' " Holden adds. In the rush for a solution, three considerations are often overlooked: the quality and value of the training content, the credibility of the trainer and whether the organization support exists to back up what's being taught. "If the structure's not there to support the intention of the training, it's going to fail," Holden says.

The credibility of a sales trainer is a major consideration, because salespeople can quickly spot when someone can "walk the talk," Ippolito says. "Salespeople are sharp. "If a trainer is training prospecting skills, and the trainer hasn't prospected in 10 years, the trainer will lose all credibility."

While there are always holdouts who will only go through training begrudgingly, positioning training correctly can help get maximum support from a sales staff, Ippolito says.

Businesses often make the mistake of thinking of training as a one-time event, says Shelley Hall, principal and managing director of Catalytic Management LLC in Stow. Hall finds that small businesses often ask to cut down full-length training programs to save money. "They're always disappointed," she says.

"People call all the time asking for a day of training and we turn that business down," Hall adds. "The training company and the client have to work together to develop a sustaining strategy, with something that follows up. ... It can't just be sitting in a conference room from 8 to 4 and then 'have a nice life' and leave. Nothing happens from those sessions. It's all about behavior change."

Ippolito agrees. "The most effective training is delivered incrementally, practiced, and reinforced over time," he says. "Short-term training will give you short-term results. You can't learn and excel at new skills overnight."

A critical step in any training program should be asking the sales force what it thinks is most needed in the

form of training. "The good companies will identify three or four key opinion leaders and have them get involved in the assessment and design of training," says Holden.

That can help gain broader acceptance of a training program, though Hall says there are almost always the 20 percent of a sales force that will resist any efforts to learn something new or change their way of thinking. "They will tell you right up front," she adds. "They're not shy. They're in sales for a reason."

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