

# Orientation For Black Salesmen In Predominantly White Sales Organizations

*a program designed for a  
productive sales force*

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A sales career has long been regarded by many blacks as "white man's work." Recently this deep seated belief has begun to disintegrate. Minority employees have proved to be excellent salesmen and it has become clear that socially responsible firms have no exclusively "white man's jobs." Yet, corporate recruiters still find many qualified Blacks hesitant to enter sales careers. The qualified black salesman can literally choose from among numerous opportunities.<sup>1</sup> He is indeed in a seller's market.

Unfortunately the recruitment problem has overshadowed the retention and development problems inherent in integrating a Black into a predominantly white sales team. More than one major marketing-oriented firm has wooed and won minority sales trainees with elaborate recruiting gimmicks only to disdainfully neglect them once they become employees.

An effective orientation program is a must if the black sales trainee is to be thoroughly integrated into the sales organization. Designing the orientation program for black sales trainees is rarely given the proper attention needed. In many cases the existing corporate orientation program is used or at best modified only slightly.

## **Host of Problems**

Sales trainers and sales managers have found that black sales trainees bring a host of perplexing problems and anxieties to the organization that they have never faced before. It is hard to generalize about the needs and attitudes of the black sales trainee. The needs and attitudes do, however, differ from that of the typical white, middle class value-oriented individual who normally enters the better paying sales pipeline. A black sales trainee

truly introduces a new dimension into sales training activities.

The orientation phase of training is often neglected by training personnel. This neglect is in part due to the short run view of orientation held by many individuals. Orientation does not begin the day the new black sales trainee shows up for work and end at the close of the formal one or two week program. It starts the moment the prospective new member is interviewed and begins in earnest when he accepts the firm's offer. Orientation should continue over the first six months the sales trainee is on the job. Recognition of the length, scope and complexity of the orientation is a must if an effective orientation program for minority salesmen is to be developed.

## **Importance of Orientation**

The attitudes a black salesman develops regarding his work are greatly influenced by the way in which he is introduced to the organization and his job. Considerable evidence indicates that turnover and productivity are often directly related to orientation.<sup>2</sup> A poor introduction, or no introduction at all, leads to discomfort, frustration, anxiety and feelings of insecurity that affect the new member's ability to be a cooperative, motivated and efficient member of a sales team. A disconcerting beginning has a continuing negative influence upon the productivity and development of the individual and the firm.

An important aspect of orientation is to decrease the new employee's anxiety about his job. Clearly, the best time for decreasing this anxiety is during the orientation phase of employment. Research has indicated that when the causes of anxiety among new employees are reduced, the following gains result: (1) Training

time, training cost, absenteeism and tardiness are lowered substantially; (2) Waste and rejects are reduced to one-fifth of the previous levels; (3) Operating costs are cut as much as 15 to 30 per cent; and (4) Turnover is reduced substantially.<sup>3</sup>

### Orientation Objectives

One of the most basic and difficult tasks in developing an orientation program for minority salesmen is the establishment and implementation of program objectives. Clearly more than one objective exists. Basic orientation objectives are:

- To maintain the motivation of the new member at the same high level as at the time of entry into the organization.
- To develop in the new member a feeling of belonging and a high sense of pride in being a member of the professional sales organization.
- To develop a commitment on the part of the new member to the company's goals and philosophy.
- To secure an acceptable conformity to the firm's formal and informal rules of behavior.
- To develop the new member's skills in the application of his technical knowledge to his job.
- To provide the member with an understanding of what is expected of him and the standards which constitute good performance.
- To reduce the new member's anxieties.

Effective implementation of these objectives requires considerable planning and follow through by sales training groups and the individuals responsible for integrating the black salesman into the organization.

### Guidelines

A number of proved guidelines

have been developed that can assist individuals holding responsibility for orienting minority salesmen into predominantly white sales organizations. The first three guidelines noted should be applied in advance of the orientation effort.

1. *Training your sales manager first.* Firms have always recognized the vital role played by the sales managers in successfully developing salesmen. However, in many cases they have overlooked the lack of knowledge possessed by sales managers about black employees. An understanding of black culture, social and psychological attitudes and expectations of minority employees and language differences will provide the sales manager with the insight needed to successfully develop black salesmen.

Sales managers often harbor negative expectations regarding the effects of bringing blacks into their sales group and it is important to get these out in the open. Sensitivity training is an effective means to have sales managers examine their attitudes and enhance their understanding of Blacks. The time pressures on sales managers often make them hesitant to accept Blacks into their sales group as it necessitates additional work. Understanding the attitudes of a firm's sales managers is essential. In many cases, these attitudes (and fears) can be alleviated or modified to enhance the sales training process.

2. *Involve the sales team in his orientation and training.* Sales managers can greatly enhance the development of the new minority employee by securing the commitment of his co-workers to facilitate his development.<sup>4</sup> One of the best means to secure their involvement is to bring the sales team together to discuss how the firm can best implement the establish-

ed policies concerning the hiring and training of black salesmen.

This approach permits the employees to express the anxieties they may have about the security of their jobs and working with minority members. Once these fears are dealt with, suggestions from those involved generally come forth.

### Stress EEO

The fears and resentments that whites and co-workers may feel at the sudden influx of black sales trainees can best be handled by an unequivocal clear statement from top management on the necessity to extend equal employment opportunities. Accordingly, it is important for those affected by the extension of equal opportunity to be permitted to have a role in the success of the program rather than to be on the receiving end of an ultimatum.

3. *Identify the minority employee's training needs and attitudes.* This obvious guideline should be followed whenever any new employee enters the organization. Surprisingly enough, this basic step is regularly overlooked. Assumptions about a new minority employee's attitudes or educational needs are often misleading. Individualizing the sales orientation program to meet the needs of the minority sales trainee is a key element in his development.

4. *Pave the way by giving your customers prior notice of his appointment to their territory.*

Few people like to be surprised by something new or different. This holds true of customers who have had limited or little interaction with black salesmen. The company, therefore, should increase the probability that the black sales trainee's first calls will be personable. This can be done by advising the customer that a new minority salesman will be calling on him

soon. This can be accomplished directly by having the black sales trainee accompany his predecessor on his last rounds or having the sales manager make the rounds and introduce him.

If a personal introduction is not possible, then a resume with picture should be sent to customers. The resume should stress all those characteristics of the new employee which are acceptable by typical middle class standards. In this way the customers will begin to view the salesman as a father, a church member, a veteran and a little league manager. If the sales trainee will cover a very narrow geographical area, it may also be possible to introduce him through a picture and a short article in the local paper.

5. *Encourage him to take the initiative.* Many black sales trainees are hesitant to ask questions, especially once they have been on the job. No one wishes to ask "dumb" questions and most new trainees experience some hesitancy when it comes to questioning things that everyone takes for granted.

#### **Encourage Questions**

The tendency on the part of sales managers and others to assume that the sales trainee is cognizant of the mores, traditions and ways of doing things established by the organization after the first week on the job contributes to the new employees' hesitancy to raise questions. It is important that the new sales trainee gets into the habit of raising questions and that his sales manager and co-workers encourage his questioning efforts.

6. *Openly discuss the issue of race in the selling situation.* During the hiring process and certainly immediately after hiring a black salesman, the issue of race as it may affect the selling

relationship should be openly discussed. An attempt to ignore race or pretend it can have no effect on the selling relationship is unrealistic. Evidence exists which indicates that race has a strong influence in many kinds of personal relationships. Therefore, it is not unlikely that the black salesman will find himself hampered on occasion by his customers' prejudices. Thus, the sales manager and salesman should openly discuss the issue of race and its potential impact on selling relationships.<sup>5</sup> Once race is acknowledged as a potentially critical variable with some customers, both parties can work on ways to overcome race problems in the selling situation prior to their occurrence.

7. *Demonstrate company commitment and support.* Once race has been openly acknowledged as a potentially critical factor, let the salesman know the company will support him through any initial racial animosity he may face from customers. The salesman then has assurance that any static from an irate customer will be placed in the proper perspective. He will know that the sales manager is prepared for any feedback which is a reaction to the employee's race rather than his abilities. The sales trainee may then go about his duties secure in the knowledge the company will not take a prejudiced customer's comments at face value.

8. *Convince the employee that a customer contact marred by racial antagonism does not eliminate the possibility of a profitable relationship.* Instill in the black sales trainees the determination that a prejudiced customer will not keep him from establishing or maintaining a profitable account. Initial customer prejudice can be overcome.<sup>6</sup> The salesman should deal with race as he would any

other objection the customer might have. The salesman can be given several possible ways he may keep prejudice from killing a sale.

In the long run the salesman should simply maintain his professional demeanor while demonstrating his product knowledge and his desire to serve the customer. In the short run the salesman may use some old but effective methods of getting the customer's mind off his prejudice onto something more pleasant. A picture of the customer's children, a plaque on the wall, or an interesting piece of jewelry as a topic of conversation may reduce tensions. Similarly, any evidence of experiences common to the customer and the salesman may be made topics of conversation.

#### **Must Keep Composure**

Above all, the salesman should always be able to keep his professional composure and not succumb to the natural urge to "put the customer in his place." In many cases, by the time the salesman calls again, the customer will have altered his original conception of the salesman.

9. *Stress that race should not be used as a selling tactic.* The black salesman should understand that his race should in no way be used to pressure a sale. Customers are sensitive to this technique and very much offended by it. In some cases the sales trainee may be using this tactic without being aware of it.

10. *Monitor the relationships between the sales trainee and his fellow employees and customers.* During the time the sales manager is preparing the black sales trainee for his duties, he should maintain a high sensitivity to the degree of acceptance the employee is encountering in the firm and field. He must not let animosities develop between the new salesman

and those individuals within the firm who must support an efficient salesman while he is in the field. Resolving customer-sales trainee difficulties is best left to the sales trainee; however, the sales manager can play an important supportive role.

### An Orientation Example

It is interesting to note a case where one sales manager found that his firm's program of bringing blacks into the sales force provided positive gains for the entire sales force. At the end of six months, he had found that a smaller percentage of black sales trainees were leaving their jobs than were newly hired non-minority employees. He relayed his findings to his sales training department.

After study, the sales training department concluded that the extra attention provided by their staff, and the extra support of the firm's sales managers, were the primary reasons behind the low turnover rate of minority employees. They further concluded that this special emphasis on orientation was good for all employees and not just minority members. Accordingly, the sales training staff became increasingly attuned to approaching each employee on an individualized basis in terms of the employee's particular strengths and limitations. Sales drop-outs across the board were reduced.

### Summary

The future will find more and more Blacks entering the sales field. The most important period in any salesman's career is the first few months during which he learns the sales skills, attitudes and work habits that will stay with him the remainder of his career. During these critical months the company must provide an orienta-

tion program that will aid the new black employee in developing himself to his fullest potential.

In designing this orientation program, the company should first state the orientation objectives concisely. In developing a program to reach these objectives, the company must accept the fact that black recruits, to one degree or another, have a different cultural background, a different value system and even a different vocabulary than white counterparts. The guidelines presented in this article provide a sound basis for building an orientation program which enables black sales recruits to become productive members of the sales force. **USEASTD**

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