

High-Growth Challenges in Poland

By Kathleen A. Murray

In October 1996, Polkomtel—a cornerstone of Poland's incipient mobile communications industry—launched its Plus GSM (Global System for Mobile communication) service. The fledgling company faced two immediate challenges: One, mobile communications was a new industry in Poland. Two, a second GSM company had launched operations a month before. Polkomtel managers made a swift decision that training and developing its staff was critical.

As Joanna Szybisz, HR director for Polkomtel, tells it, “The telecommunications industry is a brand-new area of specialization here in Poland, so there wasn't an existing workforce familiar with the technology. When Plus GSM was launched, the company immediately needed a proactive salesforce. “Our first challenge was getting a new industry off the ground. Now, we are facing accelerating growth, technology that changes every six months, and the competition that is inevitable in a free-market economy.”

When Plus GSM made its debut, the urgency of the situation came not only from the business climate, but also from the national one. Poland was among the European countries with the fewest telephone lines per citizen, according to the Polish Chamber of Telecommunications and Information Technology. Under the old system of government, infrastructure development was limited and landlines were relatively few.

In Warsaw, people wait up to two years to receive a telephone number. In many villages, the town's only phone is in the mayor's home. The demand for telephones is so great that the telecommunications market is one of the fastest growing in the world. As multinational corporations expand into Poland, the business need for communications is critical. Many businesses spend as much money on telephone service as they do on rent.

Poland is one of the largest markets in Europe, with 38 million inhabitants. The World Bank estimates that the development of the telecommunications network in Poland can add 1 to 2 percent growth to the economy yearly, and delays in developing that market could postpone

Poland's entrance into the European Union.

Challenges, high stakes

Polkomtel provides a digital cellular network that can communicate with other European countries as well as within Poland. A fast startup, a new industry, and immediate competition put huge demands on the company. It had to recruit and train a 100-person salesforce and get it into the field in less than six weeks. The training was critical: Not only did it have to provide basic selling skills, but managers and salespeople also needed a standard set of best practices. Further, the training had to provide a common language among employees who had no background in the new industry and who came from varied work backgrounds.

To launch Plus GSM, Polkomtel needed to train both direct (key account managers) and indirect (local dealers) salespeople. The company selected Professional Selling Skills, a program offered by AchieveGlobal, known in the local market as AG Learning Systems Polska.

John Guziak, head of AchieveGlobal's Polish operation, says, “After translating PSS, we conducted several pilots to check for these essentials: understanding the translation, understanding the culture, and adapting to how business is done [in Poland]. Regarding the cultural issues, for example, we had to adapt some of the role plays based on selling insurance, because the concept of insurance didn't exist in Poland.”

Most of the salespeople hired by Polkomtel had selling experience, but selling in such a fiercely competitive market was new to them. The big challenge for the salesforce was, How can we be better and different? PSS teaches consultative selling, which is needs- and benefits-oriented. That's important for the direct salesforce, which handles large corporate and institutional customers, as well as for the dealer and retail store channels, which handle small businesses and consumers. In both cases, creating a distinctive brand image is a strong competitive advantage. The consultative selling approach helps salespeople build customer relationships so they can provide information, knowledge, and competence that will set Plus

GSM apart from the competition. It's a value-added approach to selling that's as modern as any in London or New York.

Two AchieveGlobal managers, Agnieszka Polska and Janusz Kamienski, trained the first 50 salespeople, at the same time certifying Polkomtel's Kinga Markert as a PSS trainer. “The training helped to create an instant sales culture among the new salespeople,” says Kamienski. “One that focused on client needs and satisfying them.”

After salespeople gain experience selling Plus GSM products and services, they enter a second phase of training that includes linking PSS skills to the mobile communications market: meeting specific customer challenges, developing selling plans, and selling against Polkomtel competitors. Experienced salespeople are also trained in AchieveGlobal's Account Development Strategies, which gives senior salespeople and sales managers tools for nurturing complex accounts, including gathering information, analyzing needs, and selling to multiple and key decision makers.

As salespeople rise through the management ranks, they also receive management training. Because Polkomtel management understands the power of branding in creating a distinctive market presence, it uses training as a way to ensure the same customer standard and brand experience in the indirect sales channel.

Since becoming certified as a PSS trainer, Markert estimates that she has trained almost 500 Plus GSM salespeople. She likes the program because she can use it for all new sales employees, regardless of whether they have sales experience. She also likes it because the teaching methods—role plays, worksheets, and discussion—appeal to different learning styles and keep the classroom environment stimulating.

Now there are more than 100 people in the direct salesforce and approximately 2,000 dealers across Poland, with anywhere from two to 15 employees. New salespeople joining the company continue to be trained with PSS. Experienced Polkomtel salespeople receive advanced sales training, and special training programs are in place for the dealer network and Polkomtel's retail stores.

Border Patrol

Anyone doing business in Asia will want to check out Trendwaves.com. An offering of NBOGroup.com, this new site contains an ongoing series of newsletters that focus on Asia and its link to global trends in the 21st century.

Updated every other month, the newsletters are short and feature colorful graphics. Recent themes include management fads, biotechnology, and B2B information. The site also has inspirational quotations and book reviews. Text is available in English or simplified Chinese.

To subscribe and view the current issue, visit trendwaves.com or send an email to subscribe@trendwaves.com.

Polkomtel and AchieveGlobal created two programs for dealers. A one-day seminar based on PSS teaches the essentials of speaking with customers. It focuses on communicating product benefits rather than product features, and teaches salespeople to focus on customer needs. The other dealer program revolves around two-day customer service training based on AchieveGlobal's Quality Service Skills.

"We introduced the concept of the mystery shopper to Polkomtel to teach [salespeople] how to do a needs assessment from the customer's point of view," explains Guzniak. "We discovered that customers had some frustration with dealers' recognition of problems and their ability to fix them, and with dealers' familiarity with Polkomtel's policies and procedures."

As the company gained a market foothold and assessed the competition, it decided, as part of its strategy, to have the best people in each position. "We decided that training was a key part of attracting, motivating, and keeping the best people," explains Szybisz, the HR director.

"We're in a fast-moving industry, and we need people who can react fast and learn. Three years ago, we had one competitor; now we're one of three mobile operators, and we have competition countrywide. Our biggest competitor is comparable to us in every way: size, technology, time in the business. So we believe that what distinguishes us in the market is our people."

Szybisz, whose department is responsi-

ble for everything from recruiting to administration to payroll, says that Polkomtel offers competitive salaries, bonuses, and ongoing training to attract the best people and retain them. In her department of 29 people, six are devoted to training.

On average, each employee receives 11 days of training annually. Some is required safety training. Company-paid English classes are available if employees want to attend in their spare time. Other training covers sales, technical issues, and management. Management training is part of individual employee development as well as corporate planning. Szybisz emphasizes that developing future managers is necessary to stay ahead in Polkomtel's rapidly growing industry. To help address that need, AchieveGlobal introduced the concept of coaching to Polkomtel and to the Polish market. Polska and Kamienski accompanied salespeople on calls and adapted an existing AchieveGlobal coaching program to the cellular market. The two-day program includes motivational tips.

"This high-tech, competitive environment attracts young people," notes Polska. "They are energetic salespeople, but as they grow with the organization, they need to be able to motivate others to do the same."

Coaching skills are also being taught to the retail outlet staff, and so far the feedback is good. Employees have reported noticeable differences in their effectiveness. More management training is being added, and Markert says a measurement program to monitor effectiveness is under consideration.

Polkomtel managers are constantly planning to ensure Polkomtel's and Plus GSM's success and longevity. They are pioneers in the Polish business world, unhesitatingly embracing world-class methods that will keep them on top.

Szybisz says, "We have a youthful workforce in a young, rapidly changing industry—the essence of a modern company anywhere. So, we need our training and development to be cutting-edge and modern, too."

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Online Cross-Cultural Collaboration

By Dianne Hofner Saphiere

Do you work with culturally diverse groups and wonder whether you are doing all you can to maximize effectiveness? Are you interested in a fun new technique for collaborating with many people over the Web or intranet?

An international online group of professional interculturalists that I moderate recently engaged in a contest to generate the best tips for working with intercultural groups. We all came out winners, because we now have access to a list of the best insights from intercultural leaders. It was also a great way for group members to learn more about our differing orientations to our profession.

The winning tips:

Be mindful. Be aware of your own reactions to what's occurring during an interaction and how they're based on your own culture. Use those reactions as a point of information: "Something's going on. Why am I responding in this manner?" Be mindful of others' behavior, and attend to the interactions that are occurring, your behavior, and how the interactions can be enabled.

Be comfortable with silence. Don't feel obliged to fill the void. Relax, observe, and allow a quiet space to occur.

Encourage differing viewpoints. Be sure to let a group diverge—to explore and understand each other's differing opinions thoroughly—before attempting to bring the group to agreement and common understanding.

Avoid debates. Discourage group members from persuading or debating; that's far too personal and stifling for many people. One technique for debaters is to have them take the opposing position.

Observe. Before you enter actively into a new group, observe: Is there a leader? Who talks? How do members seem to interact? You can develop an entire checklist of things to look for.

Tell stories. Across most cultures, short, relevant, personal stories and illustrations are an effective way to reinforce a theory and bring a concept to life. Encourage oth-

ers to do the same.

Know thyself. To understand differences and be sensitive to other people's thoughts and feelings, we must be aware of our own thoughts, feelings, and biases. It is far easier to understand each other if we understand ourselves first.

Normalize diversity. Pick a topic on which you know there will be diverse opinions. Have people share their views and other views that they're aware of. Use that as a way to confirm that diversity is interesting, appreciated, and respected. Encourage participants to share cultural views during any part of the training if there's a difference that others might want to know about.

Acknowledge that values are a system for decision making. If we want to understand why a person behaves the way he or she does, we need to understand the context in which a decision was made—the context in which the person prioritized his or her value system and which value came out on top. For example, it's often said that Americans value time whereas people in other cultures value relationships. I can see that tendency in myself.

When I walk across town on my way to a meeting, whether I stop to visit with a person I know depends on the situation. Sometimes, my emphasis on timeliness rises to the top (I'm leading the meeting or it's a job interview); other times my emphasis on relationships rises to the top (depending on the person's status, family relationship, or other factors).

Estimate your timeline, then double it. If you're working from different locations, double it again. Working across language and culture barriers takes extra time and energy. Plan for it to avoid the added stress of falling behind schedule.

For a complete list of 130 tips, visit <http://www.nipporica.com/tips.htm>. We will be conducting a follow-up contest to further refine our list. If you would like to conduct online games for better collaboration, visit <http://www.thiagi.com/email101tips.html> for instructions.

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