



# The Internal Sale

As senior management looks for ways to meet challenges, top training directors respond by selling training as part of the solution.

By DERWIN FOX

Thinking logically, you might suppose that there is a direct correlation between an organization's budget, size, and industry type, and the training director's success in selling internal training programs. Think again.

Certainly, generous T&D budgets help training directors implement their programs, but the availability of funding does not ensure a successful internal sale. With or without this funding, effective training managers apply training solutions to problems in their organizations.

Although *Fortune*-500 companies traditionally implement numerous training programs, an organization's large size does not guarantee that its training director will always enjoy success. Nor does a small size guarantee failure.

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But training directors in certain labor-intensive industries appear to have an edge in selling their ideas. These organizations use training most widely because they rely on employees' knowledge, skills, and behavior to make a positive contribution to profitability.

Recently, the amount of training undertaken by service companies in the communications, utilities, and banking industries has increased. The common denominator is "change." Those industries undergoing significant change profit the most from internal training programs. These programs help their employees to understand change and its impact on their job performance. Even the most stable industries feel the effects of competition, fluctuating market demand, and new technology. As senior management looks for ways to meet these challenges, top training directors respond by selling training as part of the solution. How are these sales accomplished?

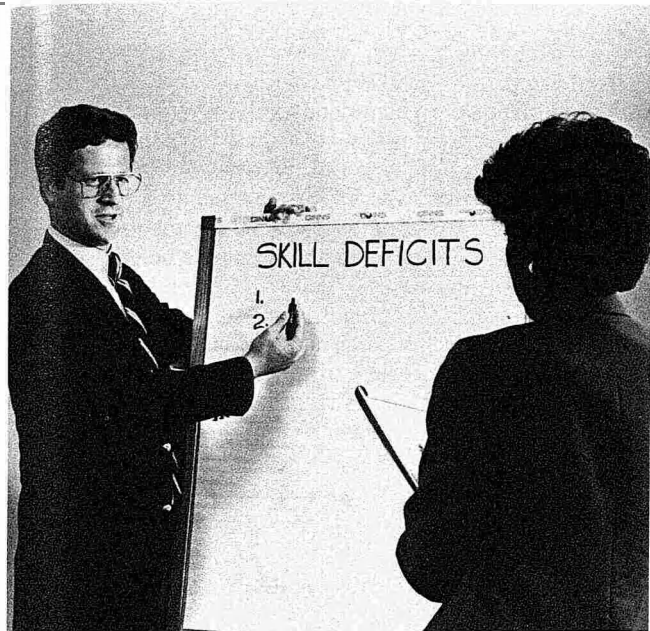
Successful training directors use specific

sales strategies to market their ideas to management, thereby creating a solid coalition of enthusiastic buyers. They agree on the necessity of presenting ideas that link training to critical business issues. To find these issues, study your organization's business plan. In it you'll find the problems that prevent the attainment of operational objectives as well as strategic goals and cultural philosophies.

## Build an information network

The first step in the internal sales cycle is to prospect for saleable ideas—one that represent the best opportunities to apply training to operational and strategic objectives. Informal polls show that many training directors meet regularly with senior management. These meetings indicate a growing trend: top management is becoming more involved with training functions. Ensuring that strategic business issues will be addressed in training programs

Next, establish an information network



with line managers throughout the entire organization, not just in areas in which the training director feels comfortable. Plan to expand this information conduit and commit time to prospecting, an activity that leads to understanding the business issues that monopolize management's time. It is important to develop an information network at the operational level because middle managers are key influencers. The middle managers who provide information at the beginning of the sales cycle may also champion the training idea during the decision-making stage, helping to promote the idea through to implementation.

### Develop business knowledge

Astute training directors know they can't apply training to all problems. Neither can they tackle every strategic goal. But knowledge of strategic business issues gives internal sellers an edge, preparing them to screen out the insignificant and to select the issues on which training will have the greatest impact.

These directors understand their company's products, manufacturing processes, marketing goals, and service operations. They know how their company's political machine operates internally and externally (i.e. who gets things done, and how). And they know how the competition is using training to achieve objectives.

They acquire this knowledge through hands-on experience and hard study: work in the line function; exposure to trade journals; business reports, and organizational

plans; and familiarity with the competition through professional organizations and marketing surveys.

Expert internal sellers use such information to find solutions to tough organizational problems. For instance, one training director sat over lunch with a customer-service manager, listening to a litany of service-area problems. Later, he weighed the manager's concerns against his own knowledge of the business: customer service's ambitious profit objectives, the customer-account loss rate, and the competition's advertising campaign.

Here was an opportunity to apply training to a key issue and to the stated objectives in the business plan. It took hard work, but this training director sold the idea of a multi-thousand-dollar customer-service program supported by new hiring criteria and incentive bonuses.

To get a grasp on saleable ideas:

- focus training application on important concerns rather than insignificant problems;

- tie into operating plans and/or strategic issues;

- address deficits in employees' knowledge, skills, and attitudes;

- enable employees to implement business objectives through properly focused training.

### Define deficits

The next phase in the internal sales cycle is to define knowledge and skill deficits that prevent employees from achieving

operational and strategic goals. Ask questions about critical incidents and consequences that illustrate problems. Are there patterns or commonalities that can be addressed by training? Can training alone solve the problems? What other solutions should be considered?

To answer such questions, professional training directors turn to their line-manager network for help in problem solving. A helpful technique is the "wish list" question: If you could wave a magic wand and change your employees' performance tomorrow, what would you want them to do?

Another way to define deficits is by observation. Sales-training directors routinely make calls with salespeople. Yet, how many directors spend time on the manufacturing floor? The best ones take a team problem-solving approach. This ensures information accuracy and builds a coalition of interested decision influencers who will stand behind the training solution they help develop.

### Uncover decision criteria and test solutions

At this point in the sales cycle, the wise training director determines the criteria that management will use to evaluate training ideas. These criteria are usually fill-in-the-blank sentences: "I'll accept your proposal if \_\_\_\_\_." These may end with constraints: "...it costs less than \_\_\_\_\_," or "...we have a means of measuring \_\_\_\_\_," or "...it's also



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approved by the manager of \_\_\_\_\_."

As training solutions emerge, training directors test them. Directors may go out on a limb and reveal training solutions to key decision influencers for feedback before their ideas are fully developed. The more their concepts are molded and refined before presentation, the more likely the training ideas will be accepted.

### Presenting the idea

The third phase in the internal sales cycle is to prepare fully the training ideas and then present them without fear. Even the most experienced training directors spend a great deal of time nurturing ideas, only to see them fade away or get shot down. This is the time to hone skills, making sure that the presentation clearly shows how the training ideas address critical business issues. Use carefully constructed flip charts, slides, or handouts. Present everything in logical sequence.

For example, one training director whose company had painful quality problems began his presentation by citing the effects of poor quality on the company's revenue goals, customer relationships, and operating expenses. He carefully identified the performance problems that prevented people from achieving quality targets. Using vivid illustrations, he showed how training could help employees achieve quality goals. He cited benefits tied to his audience's specific needs—benefits that would motivate and convince them to accept the training application.

When summarizing, he linked improved employee performance back to the larger competitive issues of concern to top management. His descriptions of the training plan were concise and replete with active verbs. For example, the phrase "... practice in handling emotional situations to rebuild our employees' loyalty and goodwill" is more compelling than a reference to "... three role-plays so that participants will transfer what they learn to the job." This training director got the budget.

### Confidence under siege

A training recommendation based on solid information gives training directors confidence in their ideas and ammunition for persuasion, even when their ideas are under siege. A willingness to stake a reputation on well-founded ideas gains a respectful audience.

Most opposing points of view come

from the decision makers' business concerns. For example, the vice president of market planning will approach the training recommendation from a totally different position than that of the manufacturing manager. Familiarity with each decision maker's viewpoint and style will help the training director anticipate objections and prepare a list of training benefits that will offset or address the concerns.

Many training directors practice responding to anticipated objections. Others address them outright in writing. Still others swear that the accurate identification of decision criteria and "testing the waters" with decision influencers is the key to avoiding objections in the first place.

### Maintain high visibility

The fourth phase in the internal sales cycle is to maintain high visibility during implementation of the training plan. Successful training directors prefer that line managers continue to participate in the development and final review of training materials. Line managers kick off the initial training and attend subsequent administrations, so they are perceived as people who make things happen.

The most effective follow-up activities go beyond training presentations to include a summary of training results to the original buying committee. This ensures credibility the next time a training director is fighting for training time and dollars.

If all the steps in the internal sales cycle are followed properly, the process culminates with managers becoming enthusiastic training buyers. The main thrust of any salesperson's post-sales support is to make sure that the organization gets what it paid for. The internal training sale is not an exception. The fourth phase really begins the next internal sales cycle as referrals from satisfied participants become prospecting tools.