

The Familiar Future of Sales Training

Prognostication is big business these days. Open any training magazine and you're likely to see at least one article foretelling the future of training. This barrage of prophecy sounds very confident, but in reading it we'd all do well to remember the sign in the storefront: "Let us do your income tax. We never make mistakes."

We know that some of these forecasts are likely to be "mistakes" for the simple reason that they disagree with each other. It's easy to find futurists

who say videodiscs are the wave of the future... or teleconferencing... or interactive video... or personal computers... or live instruction... or some yet unperfected technology. It's easy to find those who claim the future will be dominated by programmed learning... or job simulation... or video modeling... or satellite-connected groups... or home instruction... or some still undeveloped technique. Despite their brash assurance, some of these futurists will be "mistaken."

Why? Because they are trying

to predict change, and change is notoriously unpredictable. That things will change, that sales training will look different in the year 2000, is a safe bet. But the nature of the change is something else. Even though modern prognostication has taken on a scientific cast with "baseline projections" and "intercalations," the future remains uncertain.

Does that mean we cannot adequately prepare for the future of sales training? Not at all. That might be so if the future were going to be nothing but change.

*Continuity as well as change will figure prominently in the future of sales training. Lefton and Sherberg tell us how to put *deja vu* to work to accomplish some practical, risk-free planning by building on the familiar.*

By **ROBERT E. LEFTON** and **MANNIE SHERBERG**

But in certain fundamental ways, sales training in the year 2000 will not have changed at all. Continuity will be part of the future, too, and by taking continuities into account, we sales trainers can do a lot of useful, risk-free planning.

Three constants

Among all the attention-grabbing changes predicted, at least three important factors in sales training are certain to continue:

- *The psychology of human learning*—Any training program

that pays off will have to be “learning engineered,” designed to conform to the way our minds work, which will be the way they work today.

- *The need for training systems*—Companies offering more than one training program

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will continue to get best results when those programs form a system, an integrated whole.

• *The need to measure results*—Companies will continue to ask, “Are we getting our money’s worth for our training?” Trainers will have to supply the answer and the documentation.

Learning engineering

Whatever technology dominates the future, it won’t change the way people learn. Maybe someday, if genetic engineering becomes commonplace, human beings may not learn as we learn today. But for the foreseeable future, the human brain will continue to internalize and master information and skills as it does now. Training will still have to conform to the requirements of the human learning process.

There are five such requirements; all five, in the right sequence, produce learning-engineered training. If we examine each step, especially as it applies to the people-skills training so important to sales, we’ll see what is meant by “the way people learn.”

• *Explanation*—People skills cannot be learned unless they are first explained. The explanation must cover both “why” (why, for instance, should a salesperson try to elicit needs from a customer rather than tell them to a customer?) and “how” (if the customer is timid and evasive, how do you go about eliciting needs?). The explanation must also be on the learner’s level; if it is not easily understandable, it may prove useless or even misleading.

• *Demonstration*—After a skill is explained and understood, it should be demonstrated. By itself, even the clearest explanation sometimes yields superficial understanding; only after seeing the skill demonstrated can the trainee say, “Ah, now I get it.” For example, how many sales trainees really know what “venting a customer’s anger” means just by hearing it explained?

Once they see it done, however—once they observe a salesperson cool down a hot-tempered customer—they comprehend immediately. Besides reinforcing the explanation, the demonstration provides a model that trainees can emulate when they practice the skills.

• *Practice*—After the demonstration, the trainee should have an intellectual grasp of the skill but little else. Knowing about a skill is not the same as having it. Having it, knowing “this skill is mine” requires practice. The best practice takes place in real-life contexts; the more realistic and relevant, the more effective. That’s why role

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plays that simulate on-the-job conditions are so useful.

In practice, the importance of prior demonstration becomes apparent. Most trainees find it difficult to do something unless they have a mental picture of the skill. Explain how to control a meandering customer and then ask a trainee to do it, and he or she is likely to flounder. Demonstrate it first, and he or she is likely to do a pretty fair job. The mental picture makes the difference.

• *Feedback*—Practice doesn’t always make perfect, but practice without feedback almost always makes imperfect. After all, a trainee who doesn’t know what went right or wrong in practice has no reason to do things differently the next time. Practice improves performance only when it replaces unsound with sound behavior; feedback rendered immediately after practice, before

unsound behavior hardens tells trainees which behavior to replace and with what.

Of course, just any feedback will not be effective. It must be structured feedback validated by reference to what the trainee was observed doing. Only systematic, objective feedback can answer such compelling questions as, “Why didn’t I (or why did I) achieve what I set out to achieve in that sales call? What did I do wrong? Right? What should I avoid next time? Repeat next time?” Without the answers, next time there may be no improvement.

• *Application*—This is the point at which skills training too often breaks down. Sooner or later, any formal training program must end. If the use of the skills ends with the final training session, if the trainees go back to their jobs and resume their pre-training habits, then for all practical purposes the training has been a waste. Mastery of skills requires continued use, which can only happen on the job. It is unlikely to happen, though, unless it has been planned; therefore, on-the-job application should be built into the training design. Trainees should leave the formal program with a plan of action for putting their skills to work.

Let’s distinguish here between exhortation and execution. Most training programs end with an exhortation: “Get out there and sell, sell, sell.” But, trainees cannot fulfill the exhortation unless they execute what they have learned, and that takes a plan of action. To sell, sell, sell, they need to know down to the last detail *what* to sell, to *whom*, *when* and using *what* strategy. Very few people could follow Horace Greeley’s exhortation to “go west, young man,” until the railroads laid track west. Very few trainees can follow the exhortation to “sell your socks off,” unless training lays a track.

So much for our first continuity. No matter what technology comes to the fore in the decades ahead, training will have to be learning engineered. Delivery

systems may change, but our brains won't.

Training systems

A second continuity is the need for training systems, autonomous programs that provide training in different subjects to different people at different levels, yet share the same core concepts, the same core skills and the same vocabulary. Training systems are important and will stay that way because they provide three benefits:

- *Open entry*—A training system is a hierarchy of programs in several subjects that enables trainees to enter at the most suitable point. One example is a training system that comprises nine programs (in management, sales and performance appraisal) at three levels (foundation skills, advanced skills and team goals and action planning). Someone with prior training and experience can enter the system at an advanced level in whichever field is pertinent; someone with little or no background can enter at a foundation level.

This flexibility is especially important in organizations with large numbers of people to be trained. Since such organizations will probably be more prevalent in the future, the need for training systems will become more widespread.

- *Continual development*—Training systems provide continuing growth. People who enter the system early in their career at the foundation level can return for more advanced training later, after acquiring the requisite experience. People can also cross lines: A salesperson who is promoted into management can easily move into a management training program, or a manager who lacks appraisal skills can get them quickly in a performance appraisal training program. As people grow, the system keeps pace; as their needs change, it offers new opportunities.

- *A common language*—In a training system, each program is

autonomous yet related to all the others. This means that free-standing programs, like one for inexperienced salespeople and one for experienced salespeople, talk the same language; salespeople who go through them can easily share ideas. Or two self-contained programs in different fields, such as one for salespeople and one for managers, employ the same underlying concepts; both advocate the same fundamental approach to people so graduates of both share a frame of reference.

Why is this important? As the builders of the Tower of Babel learned, a "confusion of tongues" is no way to improve productivi-

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ty. All the people in an organization, whatever their job or experience, are supposed to work as a team pursuing the same organizational goals. They can do it best if they share the same concept of excellence, if they agree on what constitutes good performance. This will happen if they experience training programs that, whatever their specific purpose, foster the same concept of excellence. Singleness of purpose is essential to teamwork; that won't change.

One future development that is certain is this: As the rate of change continues to accelerate, the need for fast acquisition of new skills will increase. People who do not acquire new skills will not be able to keep up. A training system enables people to

acquire new skills when and as needed.

Proof of results

One last prediction seems equally safe: Companies will continue to demand proof that they are getting value received for money spent on training. In fact, the demand may increase. Organizations that invest in high-priced training technology and reinvest frequently to keep up with the state of the art are sure to ask, "What are we getting for our investment? Is it paying off?" Trainers will have to make sure their training designs yield measurable results.

Many trainers are still reluctant to measure the results of their efforts. Measuring takes time from busy schedules, and it may take money from tight budgets. The measurements, once obtained, may prove unsettling; many trainers still subscribe to the notion that "what you don't know can't hurt you." Such reluctance will become increasingly untenable in the future.

In preparing for the future, then, sales trainers should keep two points in mind. First, *when you can, measure business results*. Most training programs have two kinds of objectives: learning objectives and business objectives. Learning objectives are those things you want the trainee to learn; for example, in sales training, you want the trainee to learn how to do pre-call planning, how to conduct sales calls and how to handle different kinds of customers. Business objectives are the intended outcome of the learning. They are what line management expects the training to produce; for example, as one result of sales training, sales management may want each trainee to achieve a two percent increase in sales. The distinction is one between ends and means; from line management's viewpoint, business objectives are ends and learning objectives are means to those ends. When it comes to measurement, line management wants to know if its business ob-

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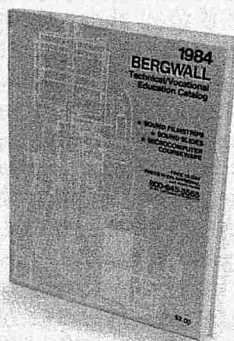
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jectives were achieved; if they weren't, line management may consider the training a failure even if the learning objectives were achieved.

In the future, more organizations will ask, "What business results are we getting from our training?" There's nothing wrong with measuring learning results, but whenever possible, trainers should go beyond that and measure business results. They are the ultimate proof that training pays off.

Second, *build measurement into the training design.* Measuring business results requires that three features be built into each training program. The program should be followed by business events related to the training; for instance, a sales training program could be followed by an actual sales call that uses the new skills. The results of the event should be measurable; the outcome of a sales call, for instance, can usually be measured with considerable accuracy. Controls should be set up so that the results can be attributed, at least in part, to the training; for example, a sales to a prospect who was "unsellable" before training can probably be ascribed at least partly to the training. When it comes to business results, the harder the measures, the better.

Like the teacher who wrote on a student's paper, "Proofread carefully to see if you any words out," futurists are only human. That's why some of their forecasts will prove "mistaken." We trainers are only human, too. In preparing for the future, we're sure to go wrong sometimes. But we won't go wrong assuming that continuities as well as changes will be part of the future. Learning-engineered training, training systems and measurable results are important today, and they'll be important tomorrow. Make no mistake about it.

