

Ultimate Guide To Sales Training

All your questions answered to help you launch a world-class sales training program for your organization.





SALES READINESS GROUP

Sales Readiness Group (SRG) is a leading sales training provider that has been in Selling Power's Magazine's Top Sales Training Companies for over a decade.

Introduction

This guide is for you if you're responsible for directing the design, planning, and implementation of your organization's sales training initiatives.

We created this one-stop sales training resource packed with expert advice to help you launch a world-class sales training program for your organization.

Here's what we'll cover:

- What is sales training?
- Why is sales training important?
- How much does sales training cost?
- Why does sales training fail?
- What should be included in a sales training program?
- How do you measure sales training?
- What companies have the best sales training programs?



What is sales training?

Sales training is any program that provides participants with the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to maximize sales results. There are three types of sales training:

1) Sales methodology training

(trains on what to do):

Sales methodology training gives sellers an approach and series of steps to follow during each stage of the sales process.

2) Selling skills training

(trains on how to do it):

Selling skills training sharpens the seller's ability to successfully execute each step they're following during the sales process.

3) Product training

(trains on features and benefits):

Product training provides sellers with the knowledge of the features and benefits of their product(s) to better guide buyers during the sales process.

All these types of sales training complement each other. But for this guide, we're going to focus on selling skills training. This type of training is the most popular given its practicality for skill application and to adapt to any sales methodology.

Why is sales training important?

ATD research found that companies in the U.S. spend about \$15 billion each year training sales employees. So it would seem irrational for companies to invest in sales training if it wasn't impacting their business.

Ask any sales training professional, and they'll tell you that a common question among key sales training stakeholders is "What ROI can we expect from a sales training program?"

We collaborated with Training Industry to conduct a study to understand the business impact of sales training better. Based on this research, we found that sales organizations with effective sales training programs were more likely to have higher close rates, faster ramp-up time of new reps, and lower turnover.



How much does sales training cost?

According to ATD Research, sales organizations invest an average of \$2,326 per salesperson annually on sales training. You can use that as a benchmark, but you also need to consider five key factors that can impact your training investment.

1) Pre-Training Consultation:

Many training programs miss the mark because objectives are not clearly defined. A pre-training consultation involves interviews with key stakeholders to understand business goals and sales training objectives.

For complex training initiatives, the pre-training consultation may also include:

- Reviewing of business, sales organization, and sales process
- Ride-alongs with top-performing sales representatives
- Interviews with key stakeholders
- Assessments to define skill gaps

2) Training Materials:

Pricing for training materials depends on the number of participants and the quality of the materials.

3) Customization:

Off-the-shelf programs contain generic tools and guides. These programs are likely to meet resistance from participants if they're not seen as relevant to their business. That's why most sales organizations customize their sales training programs. Customization is expensive, so it's essential to determine how much is necessary to achieve your training objectives.

4) Delivery Methods:

There are three primary methods to deliver sales training: onsite instructor-led training, virtual instructor-led training, and on-demand training. The best sales training programs use all three to create a better learning experience.

5) In-House Trainers:

Large organizations can consider program licenses and train-the-trainer programs to deliver and reinforce the training using in-house trainers.



Why does sales training fail?

Below are five common challenges we've seen working with hundreds of sales organizations. Identifying these challenges and taking steps to mitigate them will ensure the success of your program.

1) Objectives and goals are not clear

When companies experience sales challenges, they often view sales training as the solution. While training can impact sales performance, many challenges go well beyond training. These include not hiring the right salespeople, an out-of-date or overpriced offering, or ineffective sales leadership.

2) Stakeholders are not involved

Suppose your sales training initiative is under constraints from the sales executives (e.g., “Our salespeople don’t have time for training”) or budget constraints. In that case, your training program is likely to fail since there is a lack of commitment to training by senior management.

We often see sales training initiated because someone found a need and budget but didn't get sales leadership involved in sponsoring the program. For sales training to be successful, key stakeholders need to be part of the initiative before, during, and after the training to communicate their expectations and enthusiasm.

3) Training is not relevant

Another reason programs fail is that they take an off-the-shelf approach. There are fundamental selling skills and methods that work across industries, but unless you customize and align the program with your business, sales professionals may resist the program. We find they feel it’s too generic, or they have difficulty figuring out how to apply the skills based on how they engage with clients.

4) Training is not practical

We hear it again and again—we like the XYZ methodology, but our people don’t use it or have forgotten the concepts. In an attempt to define the steps, organizations tend to over-engineer the solution. Sellers want easy-to-use tools and ideas that help them close more business and make life easier, not more complex. To ensure training success, involve stakeholders and participants in an input group to review the program.

5) Reinforcement and coaching are missing

Regardless of how good the training is, it will fail if the managers aren’t reinforcing and coaching the skills in the field. So to ensure success, set a reinforcement plan as part of the program. Involve managers before, during, and after the training. Make sure they have the coaching skills and tools to support participants. Finally, have recurring reinforcement sessions that focus on skill application to keep skills top of mind.





What should be included in a sales training program?

The quality of sales training you provide your sales organization will have an impact on future performance. Here are six requirements that will help you get the most from your sales training program.

1) Clear objectives and priorities

It's crucial to work with key stakeholders to identify current gaps and challenges that sales training can address. Then use what you learn to align the program with your desired outcomes and how you'll measure success.

Here are some questions to consider as you develop and implement your sales training program.

- What sales problem(s) do you want to solve?
- How can training address this problem(s)?
- What behaviors need to change or improve?
- How will you measure success?

2) Full executive buy-in

As discussed earlier in this guide, your training program will likely fail if key stakeholders are not involved. So the internal or external training resource must work closely with key stakeholders to get this right. This requirement is especially important if the sales team is experienced and may feel that the training isn't necessary.

So it's critical to create opportunities for sponsors to get involved during kick-off meetings, video, email communications, and training sessions to ensure ongoing alignment and support. When facing training constraints from sales executives, a better solution is to start with a training pilot to build a business case for the program.

In the end, the goal is to have an executive sponsor communicate to participants why the company is investing in the training and get them excited about it.

3) Customization for your business

Sales professionals who attend training will make a quick decision as to whether attending the training is valuable or a waste of their time. That's why investing additional funds in branding and terminology will help avoid the risk of a training rejection.

The actual level of customization will likely vary depending on the number of participants and budget. At a minimum, it needs to focus on relevancy by including real-world application exercises and role-plays. In addition, the facilitator needs to tailor the training delivery so that it aligns with the sales organization's culture. This approach includes the use of skill application examples based on real-world selling situations.

4) Focus on skills application

It's essential to keep participants actively involved in the training. As a general rule, two-thirds of the training should include group discussion, collaboration, and skills application.

New technologies and the general acceptance of virtual meetings (greatly accelerated by the COVID pandemic) can achieve this objective through blended programs that include collaborative learning and live online training cohorts.

The benefits of spaced learning (i.e., chunking the learning out over a more extended period) will result in an engaging learning experience.



5) Comprehensive reinforcement

A comprehensive reinforcement plan includes a combination of live online reinforcement sessions, quick reference videos, skill application tools, and job aids. One of the challenges organizations face post-training is how participants can access the reinforcement materials. So it's essential to plan for this in advance and establish a method to share the reinforcement resources with participants (e.g., learning management system, sales team webpage, sales enablement platform, etc.).

6) Ongoing coaching

Ongoing coaching from sales managers is the single most significant factor in ensuring that training sticks. The power of sales coaching is that it can be personalized to each sales team member and focus on specific skills and behaviors.

Equally important, coaching provides an opportunity for the manager to provide positive feedback and encouragement as skills improve. Finally, the best sales coaching is collaborative, where managers and their reps jointly determine the areas for improvement and the associated coaching plan.

How do you measure sales training?

Often companies embark on sales training because “they haven’t done it in a while” or because “the leadership team said we needed to.” Typically, it is tied to increasing sales, but who doesn’t want to increase sales?

While this is a valid reason, it’s difficult to determine whether the improved sales results are attributed to sales training or other factors. Is there a cause and effect, or is it just a coincidence?

To measure sales training effectiveness, it is essential first to define the outcomes that map to training objectives. Then assess the program’s effectiveness using four levels of measurement: 1) reaction, 2) learning, 3) behaviors, and 4) results.

Most programs focus on levels 1-3 metrics. To measure the training effectiveness based on level 4 metrics, outcomes, and business results, you need to break down those results into key performance indicators you expect to impact with the training. For example, it’s not enough to set a goal to “increase sales.” Instead, you need to determine which behaviors the training is expected to influence—and what impact these behaviors will have on sales results.

Below is a sample table of metrics, outcomes, and the business impact of improving or changing specific behaviors.

Metric	Desired Behavior and Outcome	Business Impact
Number of qualification meetings	Improve the number of appointments through better prospecting skills, more active prospecting, better referrals	More opportunities in pipeline
Number of proposals submitted	Improve the meeting to proposal ratio by better rapport building, advanced questioning techniques, active listening skills and presentation techniques	More proposals submitted
Win rate on proposals submitted	Improve proposal win rates by better understanding customer needs, accessing key decision makers, better presentation of value proposition, improved closing techniques	Increased revenue, better utilization of resources
Average deal size	Grow the average deal size through better understanding of needs, expanding the opportunity, cross selling and upselling	Larger deals, increased revenue
Gross margin, discounts given	Improve the gross margin through reduced discounting and better negotiation techniques	Higher Margins



Improving any of these factors by a small amount will result in a significant improvement in sales results. Multiply these incremental improvements across the entire sales team, and you've produced a strong business case.

Once you prioritize a few of these metrics, it's critical to benchmark these metrics before training. If there isn't a scorecard or dashboard in place, this would be an excellent time to put one together. Otherwise, how will you know if the training has made a difference?

What should be included in a sales training program?

Every industry is unique, and ultimately training is a mutual investment by your company and training provider. Your company is investing time and resources to improve the effectiveness of their sales team, and the training provider must invest the time to make the training relevant to the learners.

While industry experience is certainly helpful, the real consideration is how much time is the training partner willing to invest in learning about your business and how your sales professionals engage with clients. Considering that, you can use seven key areas to find the best sales training company and program for your organization.

1) Reputation and thought leadership

Start with general research (either online or by word of mouth) about companies you might want to work with and consider the reputation of each potential partner. For example, every year, Selling Power releases its Top Sales Training Companies list, which would be a good starting point.

You should also explore the providers' content (blog posts, webinar recordings, white papers, reports, etc.) on their websites to assess their level of thought leadership

2) Professionalism and responsiveness

Evaluate your initial interactions with potential providers. Are they responsive to your emails and phone calls? Are they good at building rapport with you? Do they seem well-informed about your business? Do they talk about your business goals and priorities, or do they talk mainly about themselves and their offerings?

If they don't seem invested in learning about your particular goals and needs, it's probably wise to continue your search.

3) Sales training curriculum

Establish whether or not the program's curriculum aligns with your needs. Typically sales training companies will share enough of their content to give you a sense of whether or not it is a good fit for you. (If they don't, that's a red flag).

When evaluating the content, look for alignment of at least 80% between the company's curriculum and the skills you want to address. For example, if you want to improve your sales team's negotiation skills, ensure the curriculum addresses that particular skill set in enough depth. Conversely, if negotiation skills make up only a fraction of the company's core curriculum, this specific training program will not address your needs.

4) Customization capabilities

The level of customization must match the level of consultative expertise of the training partner.

For example, suppose the customization requirement is relatively light because the curriculum generally aligns with your training priorities. In that case, you can usually get by with the facilitator conducting a few intake interviews. That's enough for the facilitator to understand your business, speak your language during the training sessions, and include a few customized role plays.

But if you'll need to modify terminology or sales processes or make changes to the underlying content, you'll need to work with experienced sales consultants, instructional designers, and facilitators.

Ask the potential vendor to send bios or arrange a call with the proposed account team you will be working with, so you can evaluate the project team's experience and background.

5) Training delivery

You want to think about three elements when it comes to delivery: 1) who will deliver the training, 2) how many salespeople will participate in the training, and 3) where they are located. If the sales training company conducts the training sessions, you want to make sure their facilitators have experience training in similar settings.

For global companies with sales resources concentrated in various regions, create a grid so you can see where you'll need facilitation assistance and which languages you'll need to support.

If the training will be delivered through in-house resources, it's essential to understand the training partner's licensing terms, train-the-trainer program, and support resources. Be sure to ask about licensing terms and associated fees you might incur if you need to add more participants than your initial estimate.

6) Program sustainability

Look for programs that include reinforcement components as well as pre-training and post-training assessments. The plan must be holistic and that you clearly understand what will happen before, during, and after the training to ensure skill application and adoption by the participants.

7) References

It's not enough to have the sales training provider send you case studies or training success metrics. You need to talk to other clients and ask, "What was it like working with this particular training provider? What were your objectives, and did the program meet those objectives? How has the training impacted sales performance?"

By exploring the seven areas above, you'll be on your way to selecting the right partner for your sales training initiative.





About the Sales Readiness Group

Sales Readiness Group (SRG) is a leading sales training provider that has been in Selling Power's Magazine's Top Sales Training Companies for over a decade. Its leadership team consists of highly experienced sales performance consultants who bring over 25 years of sales and sales management experience.

SRG has successfully partnered with Fortune 500 companies to mid-sized businesses from various industries. To learn more on how to improve sales team performance, you can contact us at 1-800-490-0715 or info@salesreadinessgroup.com.

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Transform your sales team into peak performers. Get award-winning, skills-based sales training for your entire organization—from sales reps to sales managers.

