Optimizing Your Lab's Sales Performance

Part 2

In-the-Field Coaching

By Peter Francis

Introduction

It is well-established that sales coaching is indispensible to great salesmanship. When you consider the world's top performers (in any business), they practice and hone their craft on a regular basis, and they do it with a professional coach. The reason? It's simply that individuals need someone else to observe how they do something. We can't see our own swing, and it's a natural tendency to not self-analyze.

For those labs who market their services, the sales person can report to a variety of positions: the owner, lab manager, sales manager, outreach manager, pathologist, marketing manager, etc. Regardless of the title, it is incumbent upon the "boss" to help their employee(s) grow in their job and help expand their capabilities and effectiveness. A common misconception is that when labs hire an "experienced" field person, the individual possesses a golden set of hardwired sales attributes that never, ever require on-going sales training or coaching. Nothing could be further from the truth!

In many organizations, field sales reps may get neglected when it comes to continuous training and coaching. Even if there *is* a sales manager, he/she has an inclination to get trapped in performing typical managerial tasks such as reviewing call reports, writing monthly reports, putting out fires, attending internal meetings, visiting clients, doing special projects, etc. If the boss is a lab director or owner who has no sales management experience, their plate is naturally full with every day challenges; developing their sales person gets pushed to the proverbial back-burner. When this happens, the marketing rep may continue with under-developed sales techniques and persist in struggling within their territory due to the absence of professional oversight. For those labs who do not have a full-time sales manager, there are those who understand the true value of training and coaching. They hire an *ad hoc*, experienced professional to help with the growth potential of the sales person. A monthly one-on-one with the representative with concomitant intermittent phone calls is an ideal solution because of the nominal cost (compared to a full-time employee) and potential benefits to the representative and the company.

Field Coaching

Besides developmental coaching sessions in which a manager schedules a meeting with a representative, there is a type of coaching that takes place in the field during work encounters between an experienced manager and the sales rep. This latter activity is *critical* in cultivating a sales person's effectiveness and overall skill set. Everyone needs someone else with an astute eye to observe strengths and recognize areas of improvement.

Some labs provide on-going sales training to their marketing staff. They recognize the significance of establishing a firm foundation of tactical and strategic sales techniques. But — and here's the important part — however good a sales training class is, most of its effectiveness is lost unless there is *field coaching* to reinforce it. Some reports state that 80-90% of skills taught in a classroom are lost in the absence of follow-up coaching. Field coaching is *that* essential.

There are three primary areas of field coaching:

1. Coaching *relationship* development

2. Coaching *strategy*

3. Coaching *tactics*

Coaching Relationship Development

Every sales person will affirm that having a good relationship with a prospect or current client is essential. In fact, they will state that "relationships are everything—nothing is more important." However, it is interesting to observe when working with a representative how "deep" the client relationship is and with whom. In a doctor's office setting, it is common for the rep to develop a good rapport with one individual (e.g., the office manager) and superficial "howdy" rapports with most of the staff (including the providers). But, in order to become a *valued* representative, it's important to expand the relationships throughout the office. This may take time, but it can be very helpful in staving off competitive threats.

Before going further, there needs to be an overview of how business relationships are formed. We'll refer to it as a Relationship Ladder. The first rung starts with people who do not know you by name. The next rung consists of people who know you by name. The following step up are those who like you. Moving higher to the fourth rung are the people who are very friendly to you. These individuals will typically converse more than their immediate business needs — they talk about a sports game, their vacation, their children's activities, etc. This is an important level where the rep is establishing and sharing common interests. The next level — the fifth — gets into a little more rarified air in which people *respect* you. This means that the client has a high opinion of your integrity and knowledge. The sixth step—the top of the ladder—holds the people who *value a relationship* with you, because they believe it is in *their* best interest to have this relationship. There is a high degree of trust and credibility, and the client feels you are there to help *them*.

It bears repeating that getting to the top of the Relationship Ladder is a long-term proposition. Depending on the number of interactions, *what* the rep does, *how* it's done and how *consistently* it's done, will determine where the representative stands on the Ladder.

Understanding this hierarchy ladder structure is important because the coach can subsequently visualize where his representative's rapport sits with various individuals within a client's setting. Following a sales or service call (in a private one-on-one situation) a question from the coach to the rep could be: "Where would you say your main contact at this office sees you on the Relationship Ladder?" What about the decision-maker? How about the doctor's nurse? The other influencers? Hearing the rep's subjective assessment provides a good opportunity for an interactive coaching session.

Developing a Valued Relationship

The representative may ask, "So, boss, how do I gain respect and develop a valued relationship?" Most prospects and customers with whom the rep does *not* have a good relationship expect him to do self-serving things. But, it's when the *opposite* is done—unexpected and unselfish things—this is where the sales person starts to gain respect and credibility because it shows a caring attitude. Much of this comes from asking people what they treasure in life, what their hobbies are, where they like to go on vacation, the sports they enjoy, where they went to school, what got them into this occupation, etc. Of course, talking about business-related topics is of value, such as a new test or an updated ICD.9 code. These getting-to-know-you conversations take time, but over the course of a number of interactions, it's easy to start learning about the office personnel and how the rep can differentiate himself in the client-vendor environment. If the sales person knows what is important to other people, and he demonstrates that interest, clients are much more likely to express what they need professionally. Bringing in an article from the Internet, magazine or newspaper on a subject that is important to someone is one example of going above and beyond. Sending a birthday card is another. Creating value by uncovering an unrecognized problem that the client didn't realize is another powerful tool that can separate a representative from the other competitor reps. In addition to doing these types of things, the sales person's experience, knowledge of his lab and of the industry and how he presents information contributes to building trust and credibility—all leading to higher rungs on the Relationship Ladder.

What Does the Rep Think Should Be Done?

Once the manager has a grasp of all that the sales/service rep knows and has done to build the relationship, he should ask the field person for ideas about the next best thing to do to *further* the relationship. A question might be, "Based on what you have learned so far in Dr. Otto's office, are there any more questions you should ask __________ the next time you're there?" In addition, the coach can ask, "What unexpected and thoughtful actions could you do that would demonstrate your interest about what's important to __________ at Dr. Otto's office?"

What Do You and the Rep Agree Should Be Done?

At this point, the coaching process should move from fact-finding and idea-generating to accountability. The field rep should agree on the specific actions he will take over the next six months or so to strengthen relationships even more.

Coaching the Strategic Aspects

The first call on a never-before-seen prospect should be devoted to fact-finding and developing a strategy. Following that and depending upon the circumstance of where the representative is in the call-cycle, the manager can offer insightful questions that will help better understand the marketing person's awareness of the account strategy. For example, does the representative know:

- Who plays what role in the account: decision-maker, influencer, administrator? Many people assume the doctor makes the final decision. But could it be the office manager? Maybe it's the nurse practitioner. It could be almost anyone.
- *How* decisions are made within the office?
- How tests are ordered?
- The degree of influence of each person?
- What basic differences his lab has over the competition?
- What warning signals are lurking (missing information, uncertainty, someone who has not been contacted yet, etc)?
- What the response modes are of each key contact person (not interested, trouble, etc)?
- His competition inside and out — what are their strengths and limitations?
- Where certain clients fall in the sales funnel?
- What commitment objective he has for the client and what is the valid reason for seeing the client?
- What, if any, are the client's expressed needs?

All of these areas are central to forming a good account strategy, so inquiring about these topics by the manager can significantly help the field person.

Coaching the Tactical Components

There are four major areas in the tactical aspect of a sales call:

1. **Preliminary Stage** – opening the conversation with (1) topics of mutual interest or (2) a benefit.

2. **Investigation Stage** – using open-ended questions to find out the client's situation, what their needs are, what problems they face with the current lab service, what are the unrecognized problems and what kind of consequences these problems pose.

3. **Demonstrating Capabilities Stage** – discussing features and linking them to benefits with correlation to the client's expressed needs.

4. **Commitment Stage** – understanding the contact person's level of commitment and then advancing the sale forward or closing the sale.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into greater detail of each of the stages, but there is a significant amount of background knowledge that is important to have within these four areas. Teaching the representative about these segments, practicing with role-plays and then observing and coaching in real-life scenarios is essential in developing someone into a top sales person. Asking specific questions helps the sales rep see other possibilities that will sharpen his skills and, ultimately, bring on more business.

Summary

The best sales organizations teach their managers to be coaches — to guide their sales reps by asking questions instead of saying, “This is how you do it.” In-the-field coaching is one the best and most effective ways to observe skills that have been taught in the classroom or formed over the years.

Sales coaching is about getting the reps to the next level. It is about creating a priority for the sales manager to learn how to properly coach and do it consistently. It’s about making coaching a part of the company’s DNA.

Peter Francis is president of **Clinical Laboratory Sales Training, LLC**, a unique training and development company dedicated to helping laboratories increase their revenues and reputation through prepared, professional and productive representatives. Mr. Francis is a proud member of the Washington G2 Advisory Board to which he has contributed several articles. He has also published articles in industry-related magazines such as **Vantage Point**, **ADVANCE for Administrators of the Laboratory**, **ADVANCE for Laboratory Professionals and Medical Laboratory Observer.** Visit the company’s web site at www.clinlabsales.com for a complete listing of services.