



## Lab Sales Training: Bah-Hum-Bug!

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Within the laboratory industry, there lies an interesting question to ask those responsible for the organic growth of their lab, “*Do you think your sales staff should undergo sales training?*” If the answer is affirmative, “*How often should you offer it — and what elements do feel are important?*” On the other side of the coin comes a grumbled comment that Scrooge, himself, might declare — “*Bah-hum-bug. They’ve had sales instruction before from their previous employer.*” Or, “*They’ve had lots of previous industry experience — there’s really no need.*”

Within those hospital outreach or small independent labs who want to actively increase their revenues, there may be no employee position for an experienced sales manager; thus, continuing education is left up to the lab director or owner who may rank it far down the list of important duties. On the other hand, labs that have sales leadership (with several direct reports) probably will (or should) be interested in a focused sales curriculum. Indeed, many employees evaluate their laboratory on how well — and to what degree — it provides training.

Let’s assume laboratory management (with or without a sales leader) sees the importance of continuing sales development. The question prevails: what should the curriculum be and how often should it be offered. Some labs offer instruction on an *ad hoc* basis throughout the year. Topics might include a newly-introduced assay, methodology or specimen transport supply, a review of the lab’s connectivity product, compliance updates and so forth. The subjects could also be sales-process related: how to effectively build relationships, how to get past the gate-keeper, how to effectively uncover client problems, what questions to ask, what are some effective closing techniques, what tests are of interest to certain specialties for up-selling opportunities, etc.

The bottom line is, within the lab industry, there are innumerable ingredients that require constant re-education due to the complexities of not only the sales process, but also the industry, itself (e.g., billing, connectivity, medical, supplies, acronyms, compliance, etc).

### **Two Requirements**

To produce lasting gains in sales performance, you need two basic requirements:

1. People must contextualize a new subject within their own framework in order to internalize it. For those learning sales in the lab industry, this reasoning describes why sales training by a “generic” sales trainer tends to make learning more challenging—and less effective. The audience forces itself to draw its own conclusions, “translate” into their laboratory business world and work hard at contextualizing the taught concepts. If a trainer understands lab acronyms, billing, test names, methods, compliance, and creates real-life experiences, the attendees can follow and appreciate the education far more efficiently — and, thus, become more productive.
2. One cannot find a substitute for practice, repetition and reinforcement. Period. However, practice does not transpose into excellence *unless* you receive feedback. If you hit golf balls for several hours there rests a strong likelihood you could perform something a little better with your swing, despite the time you put into whacking the ball. Perhaps your backswing, follow through, grip or stance needs adjustment (even Tiger Woods requires coaching). For selling lab services, having an experienced manager/coach embodies an excellent solution. If the situation calls for no internal resource, hiring an outside expert can provide invaluable feedback and potential improvement. Unfortunately, those independent labs and hospital outreach programs devoid of experienced sales managerial oversight continue with the *status quo*, and upper management hopes, wishes and expects their field staff to improve on their own. The word “hope” does little to gain market superiority—and it certainly does not fall into the category of *strategy*.

### **What Are Your Business Goals?**

For sales education to make a dramatic difference in a laboratory’s performance, it must live within the context of a Business Development Plan. The plan should spell out three kinds of interlacing objectives:

1. **Sales Objectives**: These are the specific sales goals the company wants its marketing force to hit each month within a designated period (e.g., twelve months). Sales instruction should not be considered until you know the sales goal. Then, two questions should be asked: (1) Are there sales-related aspects keeping the field force from attaining these objectives? (2) What can the lab do to provide improvement?

2. *Skill Objectives*: Once you have identified your business/sales objectives and determined there remain skill gaps that could hinder the process of meeting them, the question becomes: Which new or improved skills will help our field staff meet those objectives? Examples might include: learn how to use an effective consultative approach, how to develop client needs, how to get the client to close themselves, how to differentiate the lab, provide basic test understanding to enhance up-selling opportunities and so forth.
3. *Training Objectives*: Now you know your business goals and which skill-sets/industry knowledge will be required to reach them. The last two questions are: (1) How should instruction be structured and organized to ensure optimized learning and (2) How to ensure the reps master and consistently employ the taught concepts?

### **Summary**

The building blocks of a business development plan consist of (1) business goals/objectives, (2) skill objectives and (3) training objectives. A good business stratagem contains sales education that results in tangible results. Someone intimately knowledgeable about the lab industry provides the most effective information transfer. Finally, field coaching remains critically important to confirm that taught principles are being used competently in the field.

Most laboratory leaders will proclaim that the best investment opportunity available to any company is sales training. When it's done right, even Scrooge believes that educating sales people capitalizes on a company's greatest hidden asset — the untapped potential of its sales force.

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