

Taking the guesswork out of sales training

ASSESSMENT Measuring the skills and shortcomings of salespeople is a tricky business and can be crucial to a company's balance sheet, as **Jessica Twentyman** discovers

How well do you know your sales force? Ask most company leaders that question and they will probably tell you that they are up-to-speed on its strengths and weaknesses. After all, they have a pretty good idea of who is performing well and who is performing badly.

That is not good enough, according to Hugh Stafford-Smith, vice president of sales at salesassessment.com, a company that provides online sales assessment tools. Most sales managers, he says, spend the majority of their time managing the top 10 per cent and the bottom 10 per cent of their workforce. The remaining 80 per cent of sales staff are managed by exception; in other words, they only receive recognition on those occasions when they get something right or, conversely, when they get it really wrong. The rest of the time, they are pretty anonymous, and often fall below the radar when it comes to training and development.

As Mr Stafford-Smith puts it: "You don't really know your sales force if the guys in the middle have to be unusually powerful or unusually awful in order to get your time and attention."

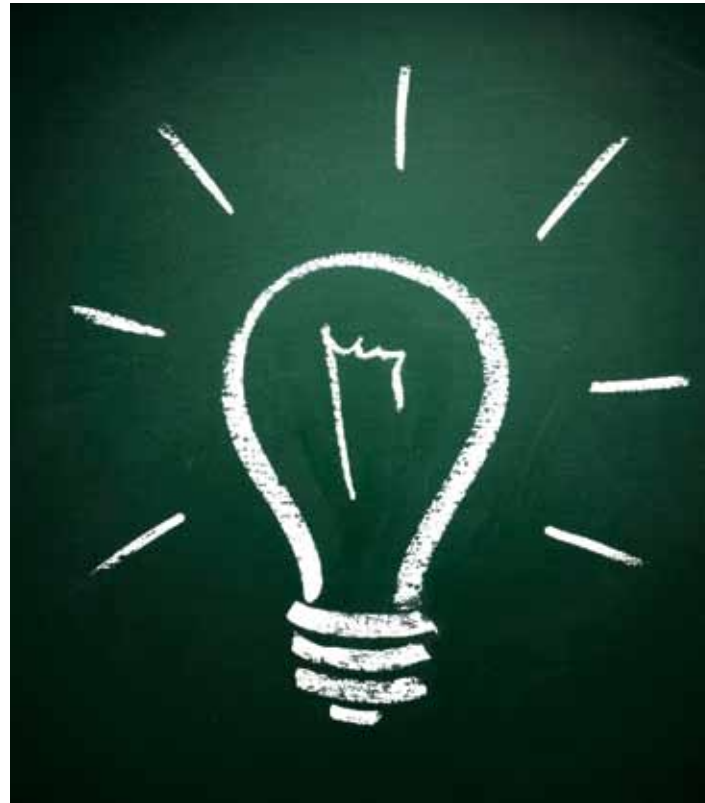
At many companies, however, the recent economic slowdown has shone a spotlight on that "anonymous majority", according to Carol Kelly, founder of KSA Sales Solutions, a company that specialises in sales training for the construction industry. Skills weaknesses that previously went undiscovered, or were simply tolerated, have come to management's attention during cost-cutting and restructuring exercises, and many are starting to recognise that ongoing training and development needs to be provided to the entire sales force, not just to those who are struggling.

RECESSION

"In a buoyant market, the phones just ring, salespeople answer them and deals are made," she says. "But in tough times, the challenge is to get the phones ringing in the first place, and for salespeople who haven't been through a recession before, that comes as a shock."

When there is less business to go around, she says, salespeople have to be more effective than ever to beat the competition and win it. "And that takes training, regardless of experience levels. Sales staff may need to learn entirely new skills for the first time or they may need to 'brush up' and re-view the techniques they already use."

See the light and get to know your staff



So how can a business get a more precise view of the skills and shortcomings of its sales force? Shelly Gallagher, head of training at sales recruitment and training specialist Pareto Law, is a strong believer in direct observation of sales staff in

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action. "Managers can get a huge amount of really valuable insight simply by listening to the calls sales staff make or accompanying them on customer visits and sales presentations. Witnessing how they handle particular situations, as they occur, is one of the best ways to identify areas where their skills could use some improvement," she says.

But cold, hard data is useful too. Smart companies use management information and, in particular, key performance indicators (KPIs), to benchmark staff, both against each other and against the targets their employer sets for them, says Ms Gallagher. "If a particular salesperson is working on new business, for example, managers will need to know how many cold calls they

make, how many appointments they book and the conversion rate for appointments to sales."

QUESTIONNAIRES

Salesassessment.com approaches the challenge from a slightly different angle, by asking salespeople themselves how they think they are performing, through a series of online questionnaires. That shifts the subsequent conversation between a salesperson and their manager in a subtle but valuable way, says Mr Stafford-Smith. "No longer is it the manager telling the salesperson where their shortcomings lie. It's the salesperson telling the management where they need training and mentoring, which is very powerful," he says.

In fact, listening to what sales staff feel they need in order to develop is more effective than simply imposing sales training on them, because it provides a closer "fit" between overall business goals and personal aspirations, says founder and managing director of Egostream Paul Stephenson, who works with technology companies on developing their sales teams.

There is one area, however, where most sales teams could improve: negotiation. In a recent survey conducted by sales performance improvement company Huthwaite International and the International Association for Contract and Commercial Management, four out of five companies surveyed said that their company had no formal negotiation process in place. The result is a general lack of preparation for bargaining among salespeople, says David Freedman, Huthwaite's sales director. "Even when a salesperson wins a deal, it's likely that they leave a load of extra money behind which they could have bagged for their company. I see a widespread need for training in this area, in companies of every size and across every industry."