



Sparebanken Vest making a splash in Norway

When it comes to changing behaviour, few companies want to dive in without testing the water. However, at one of Norway's largest savings banks, taking the plunge became a reality when results began to exceed expectations.

A Norwegian newspaper recently carried the story of a branch manager at Sparebanken Vest who bet his sales team that if they reached a particularly optimistic target, he would dive into the almost freezing coastal waters off Bergen. Thanks to the unique combination of training and ongoing coaching within Huthwaite's programme of SPIN® selling, the results were surprisingly good – the manager kept his side of the bargain and took the plunge in good spirits!

Sparebanken Vest is an independent savings bank and among the top three in Norway, with 58 offices in two regions and a workforce of 750. Norwegian banks trade on a restricted, regional basis, so competition can be fierce, and customer service and strong sales performance is a vital aspect of their operation.

Sparebanken Vest's Wenche Mikalsen, Senior Advisor HR, is responsible for the project. She explained the rationale behind the holistic approach. "When I started at Sparebanken Vest a year and a half ago, we didn't have any one single way of selling, so our branches worked totally differently. Although we responded quickly and efficiently to customer needs, we did not have a common strategy for identifying and

acting on potential sales opportunities. We quickly recognised that in order to improve customer satisfaction, we had to make some real changes in the way we handled customer interventions.

"In particular it was vital to ensure that staff would be enthusiastic about making the changes we envisaged; for many of the sales staff it had been a while since they had been given any training as a team. We were delighted to be able to offer such an effective, rewarding behavioural change solution that would combine training with positive reinforcement. Staff were extremely receptive, and all the post evaluation shows that this continues to be the case."

During the initial diagnostic phase, Huthwaite used meetings and workshops to pinpoint precisely what Sparebanken Vest needed, while also spending time to ensure the Board of Directors, including Elin Sjødin Drange – Divisional Director Retail Market and Deputy Managing Director; a major driving force behind the project, were involved in consultation, as their buy-in was critical.

Indeed, Sparebanken Vest is convinced that staff enthusiasm for Huthwaite's approach is one of the factors that has led to a significant increase in their customer satisfaction ratings and sales. Early results show that in the first three months of 2004 staff achieved an improvement in customer satisfaction levels of 6 points, and sales have now increased to an 'all time high'.

An integral part of any behavioural change solution is continuous reinforcement and measurement. At Sparebanken Vest this is delivered through coaching and the use of a series of performance measurement systems. Managers have been trained as coaches to assist their staff to change their sales behaviour. A profiling system identifies gaps in skills and competency that the managers can then help their individual team members to address. Subsequent measurement then shows how effectively the change to specific behaviour has been achieved. A 'balanced scorecard' system is used to assess performance for the branch, the manager and the individual. The managers' scorecards include a measure of coaching performance, the staff's scorecards include a measure of sales performance, and both include a measure of customer satisfaction. The branch is assessed on both management and individual performance.

According to Terje Tvedt from Huthwaite Norway, the entire bank has taken a brave step forward, "It was Huthwaite's local knowledge backed by global expertise, as well as our proven, but entirely individual approach, that first attracted Sparebanken Vest. They asked us to create a series of bespoke programmes designed for all levels within the business, both internal and customer facing, including sales staff working on the phone and in face-to-face scenarios, in both corporate and retail

“In particular it was vital to ensure that staff would be enthusiastic about making the changes we envisaged.”

divisions. The objective was to put everyone through the programme to give them a common framework and a common language. They appreciated that because three-quarters of their staff are customer facing, an improvement in sales performance across the company would have a dramatic effect on the bottom line. This has been the largest investment in people development that they have ever made and they have taken virtually everyone with them.”

Terje is understandably pleased with the way Sparebanken Vest is approaching this project. “At first, Sparebanken Vest were looking for general sales training, but our bespoke approach to sales

improvement has allowed them to extend the project right across the organisation. The business now has a common language for interacting with the customer and each other, all of which ultimately improves customer retention and the bottom line results. Internally, they have recorded an improvement in employee satisfaction, and staff feel more comfortable in their roles and empowered to engage customers in a positive manner.”

The project began in August 2003 and since then some 400 employees at Sparebanken Vest have taken part. The bulk of the SPIN® training and reinforcement will be completed by the end of the year, with ongoing plans for coaching

and reinforcement in 2005, as Wenche is eager to integrate tools for measurement and development.

The commitment Sparebanken Vest has shown towards the project is reflected clearly in the rise in both customer satisfaction and sales. Sparebanken Vest’s customers are not the only people who have noticed the changes, the impact they have had in the marketplace is also raising questions with the competition. The level of success achieved by behavioural change on this scale comes as no surprise to Huthwaite, but continues to have profound effects on productivity – as the manager who took the plunge discovered.

