

Taking skills seriously

The role of the salesperson has changed – and training needs to keep pace, argues [PROFESSOR DEVA RANGARAJAN](#)

Twelve years is a short period for an industry to completely revolutionise itself, but sales has done just that. Over that period, since I began my research into personal selling and sales management, I've witnessed the industry evolve at a breathtaking pace.

While it's true that the transformation of the role of the salesperson from being a mere product pusher to a customer-friendly solution architect has taken decades, the pace at which the sales industry has had to adapt in order to factor in new media, increasing global competition and the era of demanding customers has been much quicker.

Although these factors are pushing sales professionals to work differently, there is one key element that has, almost inconceivably, remained the same – the way in which we prepare people to work in the sales industry.

The sales team is the lifeblood of any company. Despite this, the role of the salesperson is consistently and wrongly undervalued, and consequently limited focus is placed on training opportunities.

In a recent study I conducted of sales management and staff across Europe, the majority of managers said enhancing their sales team's performance was extremely important to them, but that their firms lacked clear go-to-market strategies and had shortcomings in ability and resources needed to train staff properly. Managers also said their companies did not calculate the staffing levels required to implement their sales strategies fully. The majority of sales staff said there was no clear structure to their work, no set paths for career development, and little support available. Most, both staff and managers, said they would not recommend their company to someone looking for work in the sales industry.

What can we do to improve this dismal picture? The first crucial step is to ensure sales is treated as a professional occupation within companies by all departments and management. Clear lines of communication must be maintained to eliminate office segregation, and enable sales teams to share customer information, particularly with marketing teams. My research identified a worrying culture of separation between sales and marketing staff, who should collaborate to boost company success. After all, how can you create a marketing strategy without knowing what the customer wants?

Respectively, sales teams need to be well versed in both how and why sales strategies are used, in order to measure their impact, and share this information to other departments to improve performance.

The next step is to ensure sales is taken seriously by educational institutions. Sales is often seen, erroneously, as marketing's little brother by professional bodies. Instead, it should be respected as a profession in its own right, with education and training available for those

aspiring to sales careers. The introduction of professional training will alter the perception of selling, whilst providing the new talent the industry desperately needs.

Universities in the US have already discovered the value of sales education and offer widely respected qualifications. They also encourage students to apply their knowledge by participating in sales competitions. The National Collegiate Sales Competition (NCSC) is held annually at Kennesaw State University, attracting competitors from over 70 universities. Sadly, this kind of opportunity does not exist in Europe, which is why I've encouraged my business school to take the first step.

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I'm working with Vlerick Business School in Belgium to create a Centre of Excellence for sales training. It is made up of several initiatives designed to equip students and businesses with the knowledge to succeed in sales. We have a research centre to conduct industry-specific studies focused on enhancing sales ability and improving staff satisfaction. The results form the foundations of the training schemes we develop for businesses.

We also host a Sales Management Forum, open to students and businesses, where ideas for development and best practice are shared. For Vlerick students there is a Sales Club, which provides them with the opportunity to attend guest lectures with leading figures in the sales industry. As part of the Sales Club I run a competition similar to those found in the US. In fact, last year's winners were sponsored to compete in the NCSC and, despite being the only European team in attendance, they won third place in three separate categories.

To compete successfully, companies cannot afford to focus solely on standard sales procedures, and institutions should no longer ignore the need for sales education in Europe. Professionalising sales could be the key to ensuring companies stay ahead of the competition and are poised for the next chapter in sales evolution.

Contributor Deva Rangarajan is associate professor and partner at Vlerick Business School. He holds a PhD in Marketing (CT Bauer College of Business, University of Houston) and a Bachelor's Degree in Mechanical Engineering (University of Madras). In 2003 he won the AMA Sales SIG Doctoral Dissertation Award from the Direct Selling Educational Foundation and the Direct Selling Educational Foundation Award for doctoral research, at the National Conference in Sales Management. His research interests focus on sales team composition, sales team effectiveness and sales team learning.

