

## WHY SALES SIMULATIONS SHOULD REPLACE RIDE-ALONGS

In the past, many salespeople learned how to sell by observing other experienced sales reps on sales calls. In fact, for some companies, these ride-alongs were a central part of the on-boarding process. However, with the recent breakthroughs in the scientific understanding of how the brain learns and how expert performance is achieved, there is now an ocean of evidence that has shown that these ride-alongs are highly ineffective at improving sales results. Sure, a new sales rep can glean some basic information about a sales process or how a sales call should flow from observation, but it does not cultivate the sales skills necessary to become a top performer.

So what should replace ride-alongs? The scientific data reveals that sales simulations are a far more effective and efficient way to train salespeople how to competently execute sales behaviors or navigate selling situations. What are sales simulations? They're customized, simulated scenarios that mirror real life sales situations and allow salespeople to demonstrate their level of competence and receive personalized, immediate feedback on how they can improve.

Let's look at three science-backed reasons why you should use sales simulations when training and coaching salespeople.

### 1. Sales Simulations Are Based On How the Brain Learns

How can you help a salesperson quickly improve their sales abilities? Now, because of discoveries in the fields of educational psychology and cognitive neuroscience, we know the answer to this important question. Sales improvement strategies should mirror the way the brain is wired to understand and retain information and develop skills. Here's how science says our brains learn how to sell.

When you learn a new sales strategy your brain must first comprehend it. This process is dependent on the part of your brain known as the neocortex, which is where conscious thought is constructed. What is unique about the neocortex is that it learns very quickly. For instance, if you were learning how to ride a bicycle, your neocortex allows you to figure out how to peddle and steer the bike in a matter of minutes. However, if you tried to ride it, what would happen? You'd fall over. Why? Because only cognitively grasping how to ride a bike via your neocortex has not trained your brain to be able to successfully ride it.

To take knowledge and develop it into a skill you must use the basil ganglia, which is the part of your brain that learns how to perform an activity. There is one important piece of information about the basil ganglia that you need to know. Unlike the neocortex, it learns slowly and most importantly, it learns by engaging in an activity.

This brain science reveals why sales simulations can improve sales performance dramatically. Unlike ride-alongs, which only involve the neocortex, sales simulations stimulate both the neocortex and basal ganglia. Here's how. Through the neocortex, you learn about a sales behavior, sales process or way to handle a challenging objection. Then you train your basal ganglia through a sales simulation where you practice performing the behavior, process or response. When you fail, you receive feedback that guides you in productively adapting and trying again.

## **2. Sale Simulations Allow For Personalized & Immediate Feedback**

In a well-known research study, legendary behavioral scientist K. Anders Ericsson and two colleagues analyzed how elite performance is achieved.<sup>1</sup> One of their conclusions was that a key factor that enables someone to become a top performer is competent feedback. They explain, "In the absence of adequate feedback, efficient learning is impossible and improvement only minimal even for highly motivated subjects."<sup>2</sup> This research finding is not unique; there is a wealth of scientific studies that have come to the same conclusion. Getting personalized feedback is not just a good idea, it's a prerequisite of heightened levels of sales success.

Not only is feedback vital, but so is when that feedback is given. The sooner feedback is presented, the more influential it will be and the more likely it will be implemented. This is why sales simulations are such an effective training and coaching tool. They allow for a sales manager, trainer or coach to provide immediate, personalized feedback to sales people before their memory of the situation fades. What's more, salespeople are able to act on the feedback right away by entering into another simulation. This will help them think through and practice the new, recommended behaviors, which significantly increases the odds that they will actually use them on a real sales call.

## **3. Sales Simulations Stimulate Concentrated Learning**

Our brains can perform incredible feats, but they also have limited cognitive resources. Research across a variety of scientific disciplines have proven the brain can only process a small amount of information at any given time. And once the brain's threshold is surpassed, its capacity to cognitively grasp information is severely diminished.

One example of this is seen in the work of the great cognitive psychologist George Miller, who studied the brain's limited capacity to be attentive to and process information.<sup>3</sup> Miller demonstrated that the brain can only comprehend a small amount of information at one time. This is why phone numbers, excluding area codes, are only seven digits. Scientists maintain that if phone numbers were more than seven numerals they would be forgotten with far greater frequency.

So what does this have to do with improving sales performance? A lot! Too often the process of training and coaching salespeople presents too much information, which overwhelms the brain and diminishes its ability to comprehend and retain information. A prime example of this is ride-alongs,

which force sales people to observe an entire sales call and then try to identify ways to improve. You don't have to be a cognitive psychologist to realize that this is a highly ineffective way to learn because it overwhelms the brain with too much information, which will hinder both cognition and retention of what was observed.

Science has proven that our brains learn best when information is broken up into manageable, digestible pieces. So, if you were going to train new salespeople on your companies' sales process, don't demonstrate the entire process, as this will just put them in a confused daze. Instead, focus their attention on first part of the process and show them how to execute it. Then let them practice it in a simulation and after they are able to competently execute it, you can then advance to the next part of the process.

The new reality is that our modern selling climate is more challenging than any that has preceded it. The old sales strategies are no longer working. Today, we need to upgrade both how we sell and how we develop sales people. When companies begin using real-world sales simulations to develop their salespeople's knowledge and skills, they find that they are able to on-board new salespeople faster and improve the results of their current sales team.

## Notes

1. K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe and Clemens Tesch-Romer. "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance." *Psychological Review*, 100, No 3, 1993.
2. Ibid. p. 367.
3. George A. Miller, "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits of Our Capacity for Processing Information," *Psychological Review* 63, 1956. p. 81-97.

## About the Author

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