

OVERCOMING CALL RELUCTANCE: SALES TRAINING THAT WORKS

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ABSTRACT – Inability to initiate contact with prospective buyers on a consistent daily basis is a primary reason for failure in sales. The structure and identity of inhibited contact initiation behavior in salespeople has been identified and classified. Interventional formats have been devised and adapted for use in a workshop format. Salespeople who participated in workshop training specifically designed to reverse inhibited contact initiation (sales call reluctance[®]) produced significantly more than salespeople assigned to a control group. Due to limited sample sizes, statistical generalizations cannot be projected with confidence, but important practical considerations can be derived.

Sales call reluctance[®], a hesitation or inability to initiate contact with prospective buyers in sufficient numbers,¹ has been cited as the reason for the failure of more talented, capable salespeople than any other single source.² Across industries, eighty percent of all beginning salespeople fail to complete one year in sales despite the product they sell, the sales training they receive, or their personal belief in the value of the product or service they represent.

Sales call reluctance[®] is not limited to novice salespeople. Forty percent of all veteran, experienced sales professionals

admit to one or more episodes of call reluctance[®] severe enough to threaten their continuation in sales despite their years of experience, industry setting, or current level of income.³ On the corporate level, estimates suggest that hesitation to initiate contact with prospective buyers in sufficient numbers on a consistent daily basis cost sales organizations 15.25 new accounts per call reluctant salesperson per month.⁴ But the costs of sales call reluctance[®] are not merely economic. Physiological correlates of call reluctance[®] include a six-degree drop in fingertip temperature. This phenomenon is generally indicative of heightened emotional distress⁵ and, when identified in call reluctant salespeople, provides additional insight into the physical discomforts which accompany inhibited contact initiation, as well as an insight into retention problems characteristic of most, if not all, direct sales organizations.⁶

Although most sales management professionals consider prospecting for new accounts an important precursor to sales production, sales call reluctance[®] typically has been ignored altogether, or awarded only footnote status, in textbooks and less formal sales training programs. For example, only two textbooks used in university level courses in sales were found to contain any reference to inhibited contact initiation.^{7,8} A Harvard Business School

study of the “common characteristics of top sales people reported “clear evidence” for eight traits that distinguish top performers. “Ability to approach strangers even when it is uncomfortable” was cited last, outranked by virtues and trendy mentalistic concepts such as “personal responsibility,” “ambition,” “empathy,” and “willpower.”⁹

Commercial sources of information, such as industry trade publications and sales training programs, offer more awareness than at the university level, but little substance. Most are speculative, depend exclusively upon anecdotal evidence, and often represent simplistic cosmetic makeovers of the work of others.^{10, 11, 12, 13} Thus, commercial source information tends to perpetuate the high level of misunderstanding about sales call reluctance[®] and in some cases actually contains implicit attitude-shaping messages which can make the problem worse. A recent South African publication for insurance sales people, for example, reduced the problem to a mere characterological flaw. Readers were advised, “Real sales people do not have time for call reluctance[®].”¹⁴

Company-sponsored sales training curriculae tend to emphasize “second tier” subjects peripheral to core sales behaviors, such as time-management,¹⁵ goal setting,¹⁶ and inspiration.¹⁷ Some company-sponsored programs feature even more remote, “third tier” subjects, such as body language,¹⁸ trendy customer service approaches,¹⁹ or blatant sales training fads such as neurolinguistic programming.²⁰ Information about sales call reluctance[®], if it is included at all, is likely to contain little more than

ambiguous sales training clichés such as the so-called “fear of rejection.”²¹ Few feature substantive components specifically engineered to counter sales call reluctance[®].

The presumption that contact has been or will be initiated is foundational to the success of all these approaches. Yet, as sales managers have known for decades, that assumption is usually unwarranted and often costly.²² Sales people don’t fail because they lack clear goals, or motivation, or values, or communication skills. They fail because they don’t close enough sales, and they don’t close enough sales because they don’t have enough prospective buyers to sell to. The reason they don’t is fear, not ignorance or lack of virtue.

The purpose of the current study is to see whether specialized training designed to reverse the effects of sales call reluctance[®] has any effect upon immediate performance and, if so, how early the effect can be measured.

METHOD

Sixteen salespeople hired to sell insurance for a large insurance company were assigned to one of two groups according to sales training they were to receive. The groups were matched as closely as possible in terms of age, sex, products sold, tenure in sales, and other important variables.

The eight sales people in the experimental group participated in standardized FEAR-FREE PROSPECTING & SELF-PROMOTION WORKSHOP[®] (FFP&SW). The FFP&SW is a

comprehensive multi-dimensional, multi-modal array of cognitive and behavioral procedures specifically designed to increase prospecting activity by removing self-imposed barriers due to fear.²³ Workshop participants were exposed to the entire program including a textbook,²⁴ workbook,²⁵ diagnostic test,²⁶ personalized action plan,²⁷ and “Accel,” a 21-day attitude-shaping follow-up procedure specifically designed for and integral to the course.²⁸ A consultant certified to teach the course provided training.

The eight subjects assigned to the control group also were provided sales training to offset potential placebo effects known to be associated with receiving attention and training of any type.²⁹ The controls were exposed to less-specific, generic sales training of the type salespeople are typically exposed to, such as presentation skills and closing techniques. To equalize the groups further, the control group was provided incomplete access to FFP&SW components. Each completed the Call Reluctance[®] Scale³⁰ and was provided limited personal feedback based on results to help improve prospecting performance.

Pre-intervention performance baselines were established for both groups prior to exposure to training. The measures used were selected by the sponsoring company and included total commissions (earnings) per group and total number of contacts initiated with prospective buyers for the group. Base rates for sales, computed from the previous 12 months, also were provided. Prospecting base rates, covering contact activity for the 4-6 weeks preceding the study, were calculated for participants

assigned to the experimental group but not for the controls. Prospecting data were reduced further to “seen” calls and “phone” calls a common distinction in formal studies of sales effectiveness.

CHART 1
Pre/Post Commissions Comparisons
for Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Pre-Commissions Mean	<i>SD</i>	Post-Commissions Mean	<i>SD</i>	t	p
Experimental	\$6359	\$3593	\$8441	\$2457	1.834	0.055
Control	\$4631	\$1577	\$4841	\$3073	0.254	0.403

RESULTS

After 21 workdays, performance for both groups on each of the criteria dimensions was measured. Total commissions for the control group increased \$1,691.00 (5%) ($t=.254$, $p.403$) over base rate commissions for the preceding 12 months of productions. Total commissions for the experimental group increased \$15,619.00 (47%) ($t=1.832$, $p.055$) over base rate.³¹

The average commissions increase for members of the control group was \$210.38 per person. Average commissions increase for sales people assigned to the experimental group was \$2082.50 per person.

Contact initiation, defined as “seen” calls and “phone” calls, was correspondingly higher for the experimental group. Seen calls increased from 38 to 53 (23%) ($T=3.727$, $p.007$), while phone calls increased from 160 to 290 (30%) ($t=1.869$, $p.067$). One salesperson from the control group resigned while participating in the study. None of the participants in the experimental group resigned.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study, although promising, are tentative due to the limited sample size available. But while confident statistical generalizations may be inadvisable, even though statistical significance was reached or approached, certain practical considerations are possible.

Both groups showed production gains during the measurement period. But early production figures salespeople exposed to the FFP&SW were of an order of magnitude larger than their counterparts in the control group. The slight increases recorded by the control group can be explained by the combination of limited exposure to elements of call reluctance[®] training and attention from sales management. The large increases associated with the experimental group, however, cannot be explained on the bases of these two phenomena alone.

These data suggest that one or more elements of the fully complemented FFP&SW does positively influence behaviors, which are associated with measurable improvements in early

production. The Workshop's claimed focus on prospecting as the key precursor to sales is further supported by the concurrent increases in seen calls and phone calls observed during the measurement period. Additionally, though no argument is being made for statistical generalizability at this point, further evidence of practical utility is clear. For example, during the measurement period, the control group submitted 16 fewer cases per week than the experimental group which, according to the sponsoring company, recovered all costs associated with the study.

The results of this study suggest that efforts designed to reduce negative affect associated with prospecting may also improve efforts to forecast later sales performance of individual salespeople. This study has shown that variables such as call reluctance[®] training can have a measurable impact on early sales production. Due to the strong statistical relationship between early and later sales performance, the positive influence on early production should extend to future performance as well.³²

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