

## talking point

### Outselling the Market:

Using web-based learning to drive sales growth

by Alan Nelson



Geographically spread and often isolated from day-to-day contact with colleagues, sales people are the perfect audience for web-based learning.

Most companies bring their sales people together for face-to-face events. These can be great for team building and for communicating the overall strategic messages, but not so good for absorbing large amounts of information. There is often too much to take on board at one time.

The web provides an opportunity to create a more continuous approach to professional development and to make sales people feel more connected at the same time. What's more, it enables sales managers to monitor each individual's progress, both in terms of the inputs – how much time they spend – and in terms of the outputs – their performance against qualitative and quantitative measures.

My company's job is to help our clients get more sales. We have worked with many different sales teams with widely different cultures. However, we have learnt some generic lessons about both the way people like to learn and the things the sales team should focus on, if they are going to perform better than the industry norm.

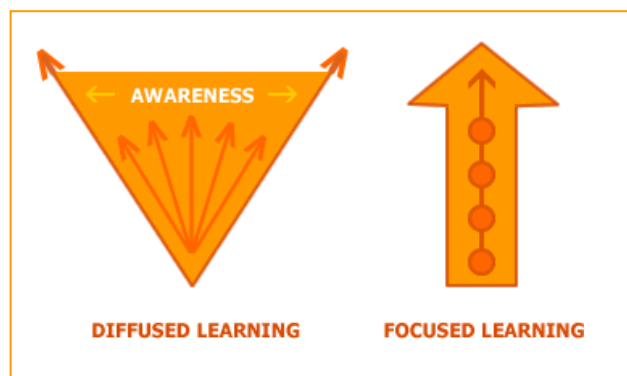
#### How do sales people like to learn?

We have found that sales people are enthusiastic learners when we get two things right

*Focus on the individual:* The learning resources must treat them as an individual and respect their personal needs.

*Make the experience relevant:* The experience must be relevant to what they do, so that they can see the link between learning and selling more.

We find it useful to differentiate between two types of learning: focused and diffused.



We all have experience of focused learning: take for example, a group of students, enrolled in a degree programme in Physics. They have all qualified by satisfying a set of entrance requirements – they probably all have physics A' Level. So they start from the same point. They then follow a predetermined curriculum, working their way through the topics in the same sequence. The process is essentially linear.

Contrast that with what goes on in most adult learning in the workplace. Each learner arrives with different knowledge and experience. They may all have different objectives, each of which are valid for them. One rep might have been doing the job for 15 years, but often gets taught product

knowledge in the same room as people who started last week. They have different territories and customer profiles and therefore have different needs. So not only are they starting from a different place but they are heading somewhere different too. In that context, making them all go through the same material in a linear way doesn't make sense. Offering them personalised routes depending on their objectives and their preferred style of learning isn't just a nice idea – it's essential. We call this diffused learning.

And it works. The sales people we work with give us great feedback and then go on to sell more. Two of our current clients – one in the health sector and one in education – are dealing with teams of reps brought together as a result of an acquisition. The size of each rep’s territory has been reduced, but they now need to sell across both ranges. So although they all need some basic product training, their needs differ depending on their original company. By creating one resource through which they plot their own route, we have achieved some interesting results:

- They have learnt what they needed far more quickly
- Providing the training as one unified initiative has helped to bring the two teams together rather than dividing them by training them separately
- Many of the reps took the opportunity to refresh their knowledge of the areas in which they should have already been strong – something we believe would have met with strong resistance if we had suggested they needed it

Now let’s turn to *what* they need to learn.

### What do sales people need to learn?

The model we use to analyse a sales team’s strengths and weaknesses has been tested out in different territories and in different industries. This diagram shows the key components that need to be in place to create a sales team that can outperform the competition.

### Proficiency

Firstly, let’s look at the 2 aspects of Proficiency: induction and basic knowledge of the product range or service offered.

### Induction

New reps need to be taken through a properly planned induction process. They need to understand what the company is all about, its competitive position in the market and its USPs. They will want to find out how they fit into this. How will they be judged? What is their target? How does their bonus scheme work?

Induction can be handled superbly online. Each rep has different needs at this stage, so enable them to find their own way around well-organised resources and then discuss with them what they have found out. One new sales person may have come from a direct competitor. They would have an excellent understanding of the market and perhaps of the customers, but would not know the systems in your organisation or have a good understanding of your products and services. Another new arrival in your team may have transferred from a different role within the organisation. Their induction needs to focus on customer handling and sales skills.

### Core Product Knowledge

No sales person ever earns their bonus just by knowing their product, but without a clear understanding of the offering they can’t do the job. So new arrivals must go through a programme to bring them up to speed and experienced sales people must stay up to date and can often profit from some basic refresher work from time to time.

Sales people love to find out about new product features and service offerings which they quickly start to turn into compelling benefits for their customers.



To get this right you need to bear in mind some simple lessons:

- Avoid the trap of focusing too heavily on facts and not enough on application
- It's not just about knowing the details; it's also about each sales person internalising them – working through their questioning strategy or how they will handle different objections, for example
- Sales events with product presentations can be great (although too often they are not!) but sales people need ongoing access to learning resources, as well as one-off hits
- Different people will buy-in to things in different ways. You need to offer them alternatives if you are going to get the most out of your team

### Excellence

Our experience is that if you get your induction and core product knowledge right, you will probably be doing better than most of the competition, but that won't be enough to outperform the market. So what do really excellent sales people do better than everyone else?

We have identified three areas:

**Market awareness:** An understanding of the marketplace into which the sales team is selling; why and how people buy, how things are changing and what pressures affect their working lives.

**Relationship Management:** The way a sales person organises themselves and their contact with their clients and their core selling skills and competencies.

**Solutions Approach:** The ability of a sales person to understand their customer's needs and wants and to meet those with a solution that is profitable to deliver.

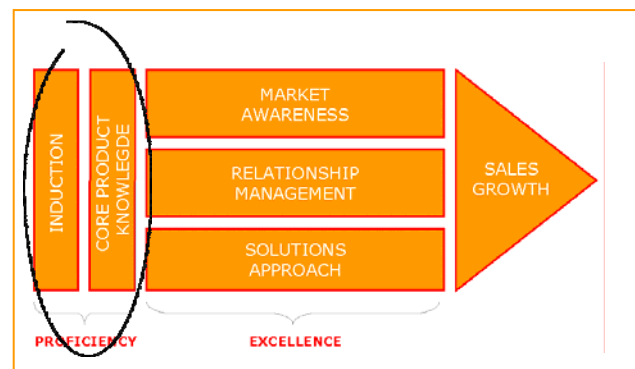
There is no rocket science here, but our experience is that if you get it right in all these areas, then you will beat your competitors hands down. Of course it is easier said than done. It involves a lot of hard work and won't transform things overnight, but it will pay off. The application of this generic model is different in every case, both because of the market concerned and because of the starting point of the sales team. So the table below should be taken only as a guide to the sorts of things that are often relevant.

### Where do we start?

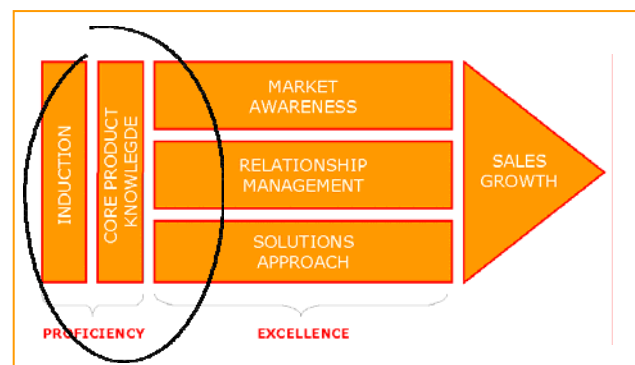
There is no general answer to this question – it will vary from case to case. Every organisation has different imperatives and these must be addressed.

Here are some examples.

A client of ours with a significant number of ad-sales executives was planning to drive growth by expanding the sales team. So naturally they focused first on induction. They also included some basic product training. The existing people accessed the learning resources at the same time as new people and this brought them together and helped them to learn from each other.

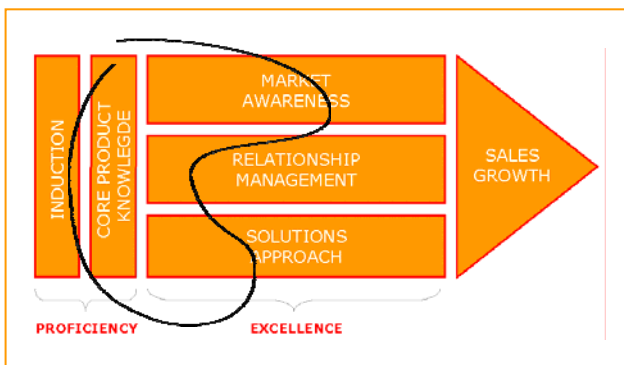


Another client, this time in the high value information market, decided to tackle induction and core service specifications as a first step and to introduce each of the components of excellence by reinforcing factual based learning with scenario style activities, asking the reps to consider what action they would take at a number of stages within a sales conversation. They have noticed how sales people are much more willing to learn difficult lessons from each other than from text of the course itself.

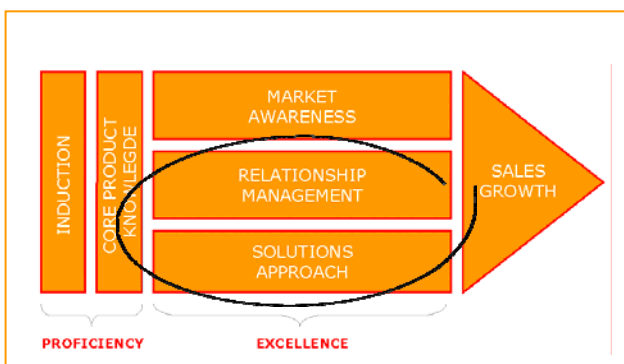


A health sector company focused on rapidly changing product knowledge but followed up quickly with a second round of materials updating the first and introducing a primer on researching the marketplace – competitors, organisations and trends.

They found that this reinforced the original learning and took it a stage further as the reps used in their research. They have already planned the next stage: they are using the current material to form the basis of the induction programme and add in some stand alone sales primers for reps to take on the road as quick reference.



Finally and in complete contrast to, is a company that sells products into educational institutions. They are a dominant market leader and seek to increase sales by establishing relationships with their customers that their competitors cannot replicate. Their initial focus was on relationship management and the ability of the sales people to create innovative solutions for their clients – solutions that their competitors, with more limited range of products could not hope to match.



So the starting point for developing your sales team will depend on the business objectives. Which really brings us back to where we started – our clients work with us because they believe we can help them to drive sales growth. Maybe you are doing everything perfectly already. But if not, the web provides you with an opportunity to change the way you manage the sales team.

Start by answering this question:

**Could you grow sales more quickly if the sales people were better prepared?**

Alan Nelson is co-founder of Nelson Croom, which he has run for the last seven years. Before setting up Nelson Croom, he was the CEO of Thomson Learning's activities in the UK, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Alan had spent the last 15 years in educational publishing. He has been at the forefront of the development of learning materials on the web.

Web-based learning resources are transforming the way sales people learn. But how and what should they learn?