

# Implementing a Successful Solution Selling System

by Philip A. Nasser

*“We must become the change we want to see.”*

*...Mahatma Gandhi*

Our client had invested in a well-respected sales training program expecting to increase their sales force's productivity and prepare the company for expected growth. At a minimum the client had expected to see an immediate, preferably dramatic, increase in their pipeline...to be more exact, an increase in the number of prospects and in the dollar value of their pipeline. While there had been some sales improvement, the client wasn't sure if it was because of the recently completed training or because of several new products which were just released. Secretly, he worried it was the latter. We were contacted to assess the effectiveness of the implementation of the new sales system.

We discovered that, while the intentions of everyone involved had been good...the sales team and sales management...the results were not meeting expectations for several reasons. There were key elements missing in their implementation which we will explain below. This client had an experience not very different from those of other firms attempting to improve the effectiveness of their salesforce by installing a solution selling system; frustration and disappointment followed by disillusionment. Why was this true? What was missing in the implementation? What went wrong?

Before going further we should point out that successful implementation of a solution selling system means much more than purchasing software and training the users on it. Our focus in this chapter is on the full set of changes that must occur for the implementation to be a success. They include the operational, cultural, political and intellectual changes that drive success. Assumed below is that the sales team and management are average or above, open-minded and sincerely interested in improvement.

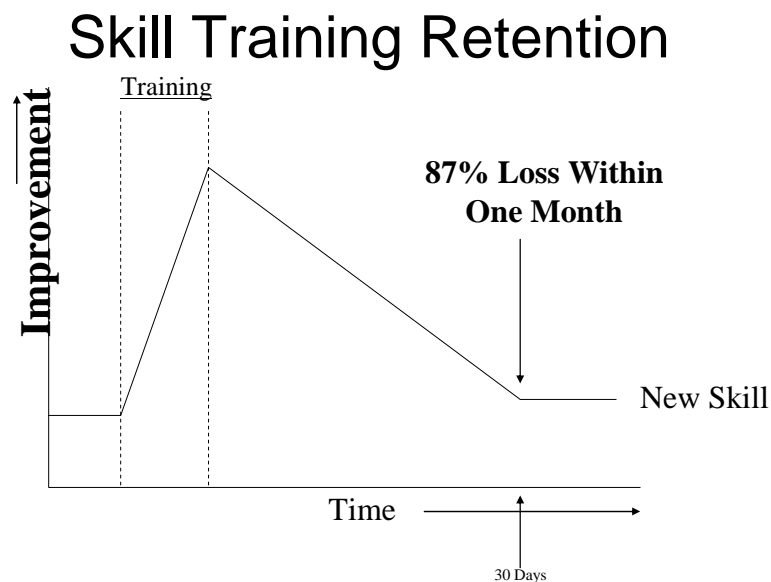
We have determined there are six key components in the successful implementation of a solution selling system. While some of this may look like hard work, the rewards are enormous. Here is a short review of the six items.

## Executive Management Commitment to the Solution Selling Process

This is the most important ingredient in the successful implementation of a solution selling system and is a prerequisite for moving to any of following steps. It will not be productive to work on any of the other components without support from this important group. Executive management frequently believes they can spend the money on a sales system and then not have to worry about it any more...that their sales problems will disappear. This is simply not true. Since there will be serious issues and setbacks, any perception at any level in the organization that executive management is not fully behind the implementation will insure it is not successful.

Installing a new sales system requires significant change. There will be change in the way a company works with prospects. For example, sales people will be asked to “position” themselves differently, qualify differently, handle first meetings with prospects differently, grade prospects differently and record the results of all these events differently. There is bound to be resistance to the behavioral changes required. It is not unusual to have folks pay lip service to the required changes and continue doing what they have always done. After all, “it has always worked for me, why change it now?” some will say. Until everyone in the organization knows executive management is fully committed to the successful implementation, there will be non-compliance resulting in slippage and waste.

See the diagram below. Huthwaite, Inc. published a study in the American Society for Training & Development Journal that showed an 87% drop in skill improvement 30 days after sales training had ended. We believe this occurred for one reason only: there was not a firm commitment by executive management to make the new system work. This further underlined the importance of this first component of implementing a successful solution selling system.



Source: Huthwaite study published in American Society For Training & Development Journal, November, 1979

## Prospect Grading System

As valuable as a new solution selling system might be, it is much less valuable if it doesn't include a prospect grading system. Prospects increase in value as they progress in their purchase cycle...assuming you are able to meet their needs with your solution(s). The grading reflects the prospect's value to a company. For example, an “A” prospect would have met more milestones than a “B” or “C” prospect. The grading should be included in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system designed to mirror the

steps in a sales cycle. Until all prospects in your company's pipeline are graded, it is impossible to get an accurate pipeline value. Once the pipeline is graded, the sales person and management will get an honest look at the potential in a territory, region, district and nation.

The goal is to remove the need for sales forecasts (from sales people, sales managers, regional managers), improve the accuracy of cash flow forecasts and more accurately manage the revenue side of the business. A good prospect grading system can accomplish all of these things. Imagine how happy the sales people will be when they learn forecasts are no longer required. A sales person's properly graded pipeline provides the forecast information.

### Effective Discovery (Qualification)

Our experience tells us that most sales people want to do a good job. They are interested in performing well and are willing to work hard to make that happen. We concluded long ago that the "salespeople" are not the problem in effective discovery. Rather, the problem lies with management and the systems and training they deploy. Effective discovery is dependent upon a clear understanding of how prospects use your company's products or services to make money (e.g., remove inefficiencies, provide better service, squeeze costs out of their operations, and shorten cycles). Otherwise, how would you know what questions to ask to determine if a prospect could take advantage of your product or service? Effective discovery leads to effective qualification, which leads to effective forecasting, which leads to effective revenue and cash planning.

Sending sales people to client locations to see just how that client has improved their operations is the ideal place for companies to start teaching new sales people about effective discovery. This is more important than product training. It is here that a sales person will glean the knowledge of just what an ideal prospect looks like, how to best qualify that prospect and how to help the prospect improve their operations.

There are other skills a sales person must have to be effective at discovery: understanding your company's unique value proposition; learning a prospect's "vision" of a solution; learning how to position themselves as consultants; aligning the prospect's buy cycle with their sales cycle; making certain funds are available; handling objections and learning when and how to demonstrate their solution to name a few. We believe, however, that the most important skill is effective discovery. It is disappointing to see a good sales process lead to mediocre results because the sales team has not been trained well in effective discovery.

### Activity Management System

The easiest way to increase sales is to increase sales activity. Said another way, if you want to increase sales, increase those key activities that lead to sales. This is almost completely independent of the selling system employed...but, nonetheless, important. Please note there are two components to activity; quantity and quality. We have learned

through numerous attempts that you cannot increase the quality of sales activity very much until you increase the quantity of sales activity. You might be thinking “how could that be? Isn’t it possible to increase quality without increasing quantity?” The best answer is it takes “repetition” to improve quality. Why do pro golfers take hundreds (or thousands) of practice swings every day? Because they can’t make the perfect shot until they have practiced it repeatedly. The same can be said for all sports. Practice makes perfect. The same is true with any sales activity. The more a sales person practices an activity, the better they will be at it. And, importantly, increasing the quantity of an activity is much easier to achieve than increasing the quality. In another chapter we will tackle the issues involved in increasing the quality of sales activities.

Increasing the right kind of activities is also important. Suppose yours is a company where experience has shown that no one buys your product until they see it in operation. We would say, therefore, a key sales activity for your company would be a demonstration of the product in operation. Therefore, setting activity expectations for a certain number of demonstrations per month per sales person would be appropriate. This key activity, and others, should be incorporated into an activity management system and reflected in the solution selling system.

Ideally, CRM systems would provide this information for management but this generally is not the case. Typically, CRM systems must be customized to accommodate the key activities a company wants to track. Nevertheless, this work should be done. It has been said “You can’t manage what you can’t measure.”

## Recognition

Since most sales people are driven by achievement, money and ego, recognition is a key ingredient in the successful implementation of a solution selling system. Is money alone enough? No it isn’t. There must be other ingredients in a total “compensation” program. Recognition rounds out a good compensation system. As we learned in The One Minute Manager, “catch them doing something right and compliment them about it.”

It is easy to underemphasize the importance of recognition. Imagine if you ran a four-minute mile and no one said anything about it! The average person would be quite disappointed by the lack of recognition. After all, a four-minute mile is something unique and deserving of special mention. There are many forms the recognition can take--awards/plaques, “Hall of Fame”, stack ranking based on key sales measurements (total revenue, number of new accounts, total gross margin contribution), team competition awards, trips to exotic destinations and cash bonuses. We have a client who recently took his entire staff (and their significant other) to a mountain resort for a three day weekend. It was in recognition of the fine quarter the company had and was something the employees will not forget.

Lastly, make it fun. Work is work but fun work can be fun.

Regarding a timeline for full implementation, our experience has shown that the time required (from start to finish) varies dramatically from company to company and is dependent mostly on the availability and commitment of management.

*This article originally appeared in a book co-authored by Philip A. Nasser entitled, Find Lost Revenue: Uncover Hidden Causes of Common Sales & Marketing Problems, Solutions Press, Newport Beach, CA 92660, February, 2009. The book is co-authored by Patrick McClure, Mark L. Friedman, Judy Key Johnson, Philip A. Nasser and James W. Obermayer.*

*Mr. Nasser is the President of Sales Productivity Institute LLC. [www.salesproductivityinstitute.com](http://www.salesproductivityinstitute.com) and can be reached at 949-768-1630.*