

learning

Magazine

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Richard Barkey, founder and Chief Executive of Imparta

SELLING TRAINING THAT MAKES A REAL DIFFERENCE

From role-playing to reality – Richard Barkey takes a journey through sales training practices old and new

I don't know about you, but when I buy training, my learning objectives are likely to read: 'After spending valuable time learning instead of doing their job, my team will instantly act as though they were much more experienced and will avoid the pitfalls that most people fall into in their role.' So how do we bridge the gap between these and more traditional learning objectives?

Thanks to learning theorists from Jung to Kolb (and generations of apprentices) we know that adults learn new skills from a combination of experience, reflection and experimentation – ideally with a good measure of coaching to help the process along. Most training interactions try to follow this model; even the good old role play has the right principles at heart. But we can do more – especially for salespeople, whose tendency to revert to old behaviours is legendary!

Role-Plays

The experience gained in role-plays and classroom exercises is only useful if the participant is able to reflect on it and abstract the lessons learned. In most classrooms, however, the facilitator is unable to provide much individual debriefing and coaching. This is why ongoing coaching in the field is so critical for any change process. It is also why the role of the "observer" in a role-play is so vital, and why we increasingly involve sales managers as coaches while training their teams.

Simulations

Simulations strengthen the learning process further. Unlike a role-play, a computer-based simulation can have individual coaching and debriefing built in. Simulations can also create a much more complete experience, spanning a whole process (such as a sale) rather than just one element such as a single conversation. This puts the reflection process in context and addresses a very common performance issue: not knowing what to do next!

Alternate Reality Gaming

Computer-based simulations can take many forms, from simple decision-trees and videos to "what if?" games where teams compete to make the right decisions in a virtual company, to the current generation of "super-real" process and skill simulations. The very latest simulations are pursuing even greater impact by blurring the boundaries between the simulation world and reality.



Meet the Blobbies: Richard Barkey with animated little helpers he uses in sales training

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are already used commercially as a marketing tool. Devotees pick up clues placed in websites, adverts and other media, and soon find themselves immersed in an adventure game where the characters reach into the real world, even calling them on their mobile phones. The payoff for advertisers is promoting a product - often a film. For salespeople and other learners, however, the approach deepens the sense of immersion providing a richer set of experiences to reflect upon, well beyond the classroom. Imagine receiving a text from a 'customer' you were selling to some weeks previously in a simulation, and how that would bring back all the lessons...

Real-Plays

The logical next step from games that impinge on reality is to base the learning on reality. In a "real-play" fictional case studies and slightly awkward role-plays are replaced by real life situations and actual conversations with customers. This requires a degree of preparation, but the learning impact can be significant. So can the commercial impact; in one real-play workshop based on generating appointments, the group walked away with 14 actual leads!

Just in Time Learning & Coaching

The final stage in our journey from role-play to reality takes us back to the field where, as noted, the

manager's coaching role is critical to the success of any skill building process. In sales, our research shows that fewer than 15 per cent of managers provide the right quality or quantity of coaching. Part of the solution is to train, motivate and support managers to become better coaches. However, technology can also provide support by linking learning and coaching to the application tools and processes used on a daily basis.

Increasingly this support takes a mobile form. A salesperson waiting for a meeting can access their account plan, bring up a framework to help structure the meeting, review best practice for that type of interaction, and work through a mini simulation to prepare. As well as, of course, debrief them selves afterwards to reflect on what happened!

The principles of experiential learning have been understood for many years, but they are not applied often enough. Imparta's research shows that experiential learning can be at least twice as effective as traditional teaching, and across the industry, new approaches and technologies are making it a more accessible option for learners.

Richard Barkey is the founder and Chief Executive of Imparta, one of the largest soft skills training companies in the UK. Visit: www.imparta.co.uk. ♦♦♦♦♦