Sales Training Goes Experiential

Exploring the Available Options in Modern Sales Training
After working through this section, the user will be able to identify the three different types of [enter the name of your widget here] and how to use them.

Or at least, that’s how traditional learning objectives tend to read. I don’t know about you, but when I buy training, my objectives are more like: “After spending valuable time learning instead of doing their job, my team will instantly act as though they were much more skilled and experienced, avoiding the pitfalls that trap most people in their role”. So how do we bridge the gap?

Most people acknowledge that, where skills are concerned, adults ‘learn by doing’. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, for example, reports that “we are likely to remember 90 per cent of what we read, hear, see, say and do, compared to only 20 per cent of what we read.”

Thanks to learning theorists from Jung to David Kolb, we can add some additional depth to that insight. It turns out that adults actually learn best from a combination of experience, reflection and experimentation – ideally with a good measure of coaching to help the process along. This process is perhaps best described in Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle:

![Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle](image-url)
In the first stage of the Learning Cycle, immediate or concrete experiences (from day-to-day activities, an exercise or a role-play, for example), provide a foundation on which learning can be built. These experiences then lead to observations and reflections about what worked or didn’t work and why, so it is important for the learner to know the results of their actions. These observations and reflections are assimilated and distilled into ‘abstract concepts’, producing new implications for action which can be actively tested by the participant. This process in turn creates new experiences, kicking off new learning cycles.

**Role-plays**

Role-plays can be intimidating for participants, but there is a good reason why they remain a core part of so much soft-skills training: they work. Implemented well, a role-play can follow the experiential learning cycle very closely. However, Kolb’s insights show that the experience gained in role-plays and classroom exercises is only useful if the participant is able to reflect on it. 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 increasingly sales managers are involved as coaches while their teams are being trained.

The need for this level of interactivity explains why a PowerPoint presentation alone is a poor way to learn new skills. Some training interactions, however, do 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.

So what options are available when training a modern sales force?

Another issue that commonly arises with role-plays is that participants are not comfortable playing an imaginary role. “I’m not an actor” is a phrase that one often hears. One solution is to tailor role-plays so that they match the real work environment very closely. Another is to keep the contextual detail to a minimum, focussing on the execution of a very specific skill rather than the faithful reproduction of a whole situation. In the end, though, most people just need help getting started; the reality of doing a role play is rarely as bad as the anticipation.
Simulations

Simulations strengthen the learning process further by allowing the user to ‘learn by doing’ in an accelerated environment. 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 learning in context, and allows you to address one of the most common performance issues: not doing something at all, rather than doing it wrong.

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.

These super-real simulations satisfy all the key criteria for engaging and motivating a user: they offer a challenge and a sense of realism; they create opportunities to explore, and they allow the user plenty of control. In a sales context, these criteria combine with the need for reflection to suggest a number of key requirements:

• **Rich, nonlinear interaction** with multiple conversation choices and topics, as well as other actions (e.g. selecting a document to present) allowing people to approach a situation as they would in real life.

• **Combining interpersonal and analytical skills.** Selling requires analytical skills as well as interpersonal ones, so a sales simulation needs to allow users to use real analytical tools within the simulated context. These tools also allow the user to learn in a more structured and effective way than if they were simply ‘winging it’.

• **Built-in coaching,** to help users reflect on their experiences. As noted above, this stage is critical in experiential learning, and equips users to apply the new skills in a way that is tailored to them and each situation, rather than training them in a ‘cookie cutter’ approach.
A simulation can know exactly what each user has done so it's possible to give extremely detailed feedback.

- **Accurate feedback.** A simulation can know exactly what each user has done (as well as when and how long it took), so it's possible to give extremely detailed feedback on a full range of skills, providing an important benchmark and creating a strong desire to learn.

The context in which a simulation is used is also significant. The research into game-based learning highlights the importance of communication and reflection outside the game as well as within it. Being able to talk to peers and experts about the game during play improved performance and learning, which is why simulations are often embedded into more traditional workshops. An alternative is to use a range of what Bonk & Dennen call ‘cognitive tools’ such as forums, bulletin boards and concept mapping tools, which also improve performance.

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Alternate Reality Gaming

The very latest simulations are pursuing even greater impact by blurring the boundaries between the simulation world and reality. Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), as they are known, are based largely in the real world, using multiple media and game elements to engage participants and, to some extent, allow them to shape the game itself. 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. For an example, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Love_Bees](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Love_Bees)

Companies often use Alternate Reality Games to generate interest in a film or a computer game (e.g. the film The Matrix, or the computer game Halo). The ARG is often set in a similar world to the product it is promoting – for example, the entry point to the ARG may be a hidden clue in an advert for the film. The ARG draws in a crowd of influential ‘early adopters’ who then help to spread word of the end product and influence their peers to buy it.

For salespeople and other learners, however, the approach offers a way of deepening the sense of immersion and providing a richer set of experiences to reflect upon, well beyond the classroom. As an example, participants could collaborate around an almost-real client over a period of several weeks, with both the planning and the interaction being closely monitored by coaches. The approach can also help learners to keep new concepts at ‘top of mind’: imagine receiving a text message or even a telephone call from a simulated customer you were selling to some weeks before.
The motivational power of a game is, in part, due to the uncertain outcome and the focus on a goal or challenge that the user needs to accomplish. Unlike most formal training or education, in games there are multiple paths into success, so the participant is able to refine and adapt new skills to their own personal style – in effect, ‘bedding them in’ before tackling the real world again. Game-based learning is particularly relevant for a sales audience, as it appeals directly to their competitive spirit, as well as the increasingly ‘Generation Y’ make-up of sales forces everywhere.

**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 tends to be more effective with telephone-based relationships, and requires a degree of preparation (for example, pre-screening contact details). However, the learning and commercial impact can be significant. In one real-play workshop on generating appointments, the group walked away with 14 actual leads.

**Just-in-time learning and coaching**

The final stage in our journey from role-play to reality takes us back to the field. Indeed, a primary prediction for the future of sales training is that it will increasingly focus on learning on the job, rather than learning in the classroom.

Just as in a workshop, the role of coaching is critical to ensure that salespeople gain the maximum benefit from their ongoing experience in the field. Away from a learning environment, it is generally the sales manager who needs to provide that coaching, during both call planning and call execution. Imparta’s own research shows that without a strong supporting structure, fewer than 15 per cent of managers provide the quality or quantity of coaching that their teams need.

Part of the solution is clearly to train, motivate and measure managers as they seek to become better coaches. We have also found that the judicious use of ‘coach the coach’ sessions can have a strong impact.

However, technology can also help, by providing just-in-time learning and even the ability to self-coach, and connecting it all back to the application tools and processes used by salespeople on a daily basis.
Increasingly this support can take a mobile form. A salesperson waiting for a meeting can use a PDA to access their account plan, bring up a framework to help structure the meeting, review best practice for that type of interaction, and even work through a mini simulation to help themselves prepare. As well as, of course, debrief afterwards to reflect on what happened!

In a less technical vein, account clinics (sometimes known as Reconnects) can provide a way of leveraging your best coaches to help salespeople or teams to succeed in major tasks such as winning a large bid, planning a new campaign or gaining entry to a promising prospect.

You get what you measure

No matter how experiential your training is, running it with no measurement afterwards is like flying a plane with your eyes closed – you have no way track your progress along a given course, or to correct any deviations. The best approaches use all four levels of the familiar Kirkpatrick model:

• **Level 1: Reactions.** Participants’ reactions to the training content, approach and faculty should be measured using on-the-spot evaluation forms. Experiential learning will usually score very highly, so it is important also to run occasional ‘plus-delta’ sessions in the workshop itself, to identify what’s working particularly well and any areas for improvement.

• **Level 2: Knowledge.** Learning can be measured using scenario-based tests designed to assess if people have learned not just how to define the concepts taught, but how to apply them. Ideally, these are used before and after training to give an initial read on how well the new skills have bedded in.

• **Level 3: Behaviour.** The transfer of learning to everyday activity can be measured using behavioural assessments. These give a read on how the learning has changed what people actually do, against a clearly defined set of sales (and sales management) competencies. Although self-assessment is a tempting way to do this, it is far more effective to use field observations from an external coach or the individual’s sales manager. In the latter case, managers will often need training in observation to ensure that you get a consistent read across the organisation.

• **Level 4: Business Impact.** Linking training to business results is always difficult, not least because are there are so many variables involved. However, there are a number of effective ways to measure the financial impact of new skills. Perhaps the most straightforward is to collect success stories from individual salespeople, using a team of peers to audit the financial impact that can be attributed to the new approaches.
Measuring impact in this way allows you to reflect on what is working and what isn’t, so that you can refine your approach before continuing. In a very real way, this process of reflecting on the programme as a whole extends the application of Kolb’s experiential learning model from the individual level, to the organisation.

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 two to four times as effective as traditional teaching. New approaches and technologies are opening up a wide range of options and making them increasingly accessible for learners in all industries.

References

2. Curtis Bonk et al, Massive Multiplayer Online Gaming: A Research Framework for Military Training and Education
Why Imparta?

• Imparta is ranked among the top three global sales training companies by US based consultancy ES Research Group, and has been named among the Top 20 global Sales Training Companies for the last three years running by TrainingIndustry.com

• Our long-term clients include some of the world’s leading organisations, including GE, O2, Lloyds TSB, HP, Intel and the WPP Group.

• We cover sales, marketing and service, and are able to provide the “glue” that aligns those teams (e.g. sales-enabled product training) as well as in depth expertise in each field.

• We have a dedicated Client Impact team that can help you roll out a single workshop, or a sophisticated Sales, Marketing or Service Academy covering reinforcement, application, coaching, measurement and accreditation.

• Our expertise in experiential learning design ensures very strong learning impact (we are a pioneer in the world of simulations and remain a Microsoft Gold Certified Development Partner).

• Imparta has 140 trainers and associate trainers around the world and the capability to deliver large-scale, global roll-outs in local languages.

Next steps

Please feel free to contact one of our Client Directors on +44 (0)20 7610 8800, via clientenquiries@imparta.com or via www.imparta.com