

## Successfully Introducing a Sales Training Program

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Sales Talk

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At many professional service firms, the fee-earners derisively view the sales sensibility and the consultants who try to inculcate it. Even the most receptive partners will not sit still for days of classroom training, especially in sales. A sales trainer who clashes painfully with your partners will spoil the chance of ever persuading the firm to try it again.

But we discovered that even the most recalcitrant culture will respond productively to the right personality. Such was our happy lesson when Swidler Berlin Shereff Friedman, LLP (SBSF) embarked on its first formal sales training program.

A number of critical factors allowed for a successful sales training process at SBSF:

- A challenging marketplace that was conducive to action
- A senior partner who wanted to go forward
- A young hungry group of motivated partners
- Trainers adapted themselves to the specific needs of the firm and each trainee in a non-threatening way.

### **The wake-up call**

SBSF is a law firm with nearly 300 lawyers in offices in Washington, D.C. and New York City. Annual revenues reported in the 2002 AmLaw 100 list were \$165 million. Four years ago, when I started working at SBSF, I suggested adding a sales training component to the marketing mix. The answer was something like, "Why would we do that? We have more clients than we can handle."

For four years the firm continued to prosper, fueled largely by the telecom boom. Marketing colleagues told me that as long as the firm felt no "pain," it would feel no need to invest time and money in sales training. All the persuasion in the world would not overcome the complacency.

The market for SBSF's banner telecommunications practice had become rather volatile by January 2003. Then the bottom fell out. Mergers and acquisitions declined dramatically and suddenly partners were not as busy as they were before. A few didn't have enough clients. The wake-up call had sounded and it was no longer enough to sit back, practice law and wait for clients to show up.

It was the perfect moment to reintroduce the idea of a sales training program.

### **The best match**

With Catherine Wang, a senior partner in the telecom group, as our persistent

advocate at the firm for sales training, I now had a powerful ally. She understood the situation in her market and unambiguously supported corrective action. But sales training wasn't to be just a telecom play. She was visionary enough to see its firm-wide value.

Our next step was to fashion a beta testing group. Nine young and rising partners in our Washington, D.C. office were enlisted as trainees – partners who had fewer laurels to rest on and who understood their stake in developing sales skills. These partners represented a diverse practice group sample: corporate, tax, antitrust, government affairs and insurance, as well as telecom.

Yet just as we knew that these trainees weren't likely to put up with daylong lectures and Powerpoints, we also realized that sales trainers who come across like motivational speakers would be real turn-offs as well. We had to be very careful in our choice of consultant.

We interviewed nine candidates for the job, all with different methodologies and widely divergent personalities. We decided on trainers Jim Durham and Harry Keshet of Massachusetts, because they were willing to tailor a program uniquely suited to our firm's "let's go get 'em" culture. Jim is a lawyer who is a whirlwind of energy and action. Harry is an organizational psychologist with a very low-key, mentor-like presence. Their complimentary, but opposite, personalities made them the perfect combination.

### **Meyers-Briggs test**

The trainers' first move was to administer the Meyers-Briggs personality test to all the fee-earners. It was a smart move, as it helped them fashion a different coaching style for each student. The training program would start with a half-day of lecture and presentation, followed by extended one-on-one telephone coaching by Harry.

After one month of individualized coaching, the buy-in among the partners was so good that they were able to sit still for, and greatly appreciate, a subsequent full day of classroom presentation. Then followed three months of additional coaching. By the time it was over, at least seven of the nine participants had tangible new business directly attributable to the training.

### **The right stuff**

Harry explored:

- When to ask for the business during the sales process and when not to
- How to ask questions, and how to drill down to elicit more information from the client
- Developing "products" and providing value during the sales process.

The fee-earners already knew much of what was taught. Using this existing knowledge, the trainers were letting the trainees *be themselves*. No one, and especially fee-earners, can be expected to pursue an approach to selling with which they are inherently

uncomfortable. Some people can cold-call; others can't. Fee-earners are learning that sales is not an alien skill but something dormant in the human personality. The whole point is to find that hidden strength and let it loose.

### **Referral sources**

As part of the individualized training, the fee-earners were given separate skills-development assignments. The antitrust fee-earner, for one, was assigned to develop lists of law firm referral sources, because that's where his business came from. He created an introductory self-profile package to send to new law firms, and was trained to identify the best contacts at each firm. He worked with the sales coach on ways to reassure referring firms that he wouldn't poach their corporate work.

The telecom fee-earners, on the other hand, were assigned to develop lists of employees who used to work for now-defunct telecom companies. Many of these executives had worked with SBSF in the past, and now were decision-makers at their new companies.

One example vividly illustrates how individually tailored sales training produces tangible results. The tax partner in the group had made three cold calls to a prospect and did not receive a call back. He was resisting making a fourth call. Harry gently insisted that he try again and reluctantly, he did. Ten minutes after he made the fourth call, the fee-earner announced that the prospect had agreed to an appointment. And, in turn, that appointment led to an engagement.

### **Support at the top**

A final and extremely important reason why our 2003 beta group succeeded was because the firm's top management unequivocally supported it. Their message was already loud and clear in January 2003 when the managing partner attended a kickoff dinner, as did two members of the executive board. Equally crucial, top management's endorsement was tangibly reinforced during the next few months because the consultants were sending periodic reports to the managing partner. Everybody knew that the boss was watching.

The importance of this involvement at the top became apparent during our second go at sales training. This second session that spring with a different group of fee-earners was less successful -- in large part because the managing partner could not attend the kickoff

due. As he was less directly involved, partner commitment slackened proportionately.

Going forward, the managing partner will be involved as much as possible in upcoming sessions. It's also a reflection on the substantive value of the sales training that this particular managing partner, who is an extraordinary salesman, believes that he too has something to learn by being a part of it.

### **Return on Investment**

Yet even our second, less fruitful endeavor finally justified itself in terms of time and money. One partner who took to the agenda avidly and was rewarded with a major piece of new business. Revenues from just this one file easily surpassed the total consulting fees. It is not always useful or fair to try and calculate exact return-on-investment for either marketing or sales. That said, if you add in the dozen or more pieces of new business generated by the January trainees, we're talking about a total return that dwarfs the investment – even after we factor in lost billable time.

Yet the fairest assessment of ROI must include the long term. The sales trainers were out of SBSF by October 2003, but the partners are carrying out the skills they learned. Particularly noteworthy, the fee-earners who participated in the January program are now cross selling each other.

It's very much as if a bond was created as a result of their shared training experience. Their trust in each other's sales skills is such that collaborative pitches simply make a lot of sense. We hope to capitalize on this observation by continuing the training on a practice group level in 2004.

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