

Sales Meetings: Investment or Expense?

By CarolAnn Livernoche

Some of my fondest recollections of sales meetings were the opportunities to socialize with my fellow sales warriors that I hadn't seen in a while. After enduring hours of sessions and presentations that were like "drinking from a fire hose", we relished the opportunity to unwind and catch up at the end of the day.

There is no doubt that the social and cultural aspects of sales meetings are still important, but what else is accomplished during a sales meeting?

It seems that in every sales situation these days, we are being asked about return on investment. Before buyers fork over large sums of money, they want to know what they are going to get in return.

Shouldn't the same thought process apply for an event where you are taking valuable resources out of the field and spending lots of money to have them all assembled in one place?

The point is – a sales meeting can be fun and productive at the same time. Some key things to consider as you plan a sales meeting:

Establish Objectives

As participants depart, what do you want them to take away? You may want them to understand certain things about products, learn new marketing messages, or develop certain skills. Take a look at what is most appropriate for your team given the business objectives for the coming sales year. In short, what do you expect to accomplish during this event?

Make the objectives of the meeting simple and realistic and communicate them as you kick-off your meeting and reinforce them as you cover points relative to them during the meeting. Use your objectives as a "filter" for content, speakers, and the creation of the agenda. Objectives should be clearly defined and communicated with everyone who will participate in the event.

Alignment Is Key

A sales meeting is an opportunity to get your revenue producers on the same page. What does your organization need from your sales team over the next

year? How can you use this event to begin to communicate those needs and provide them with the tools necessary to deliver?

Establish a theme that is representative of areas of focus for your team. Get the management team on board with the objectives and the theme, so that participants are seeing and hearing reinforcement throughout the event.

Make sure that speakers know what is expected of them and that their content is aligned with your objectives.

Lastly, as it relates to alignment, look for input and validation from key sales resources as you develop your content. Objectives help you to identify the needs of sales management and the organization, but you also need to understand how those align with the needs of your sales team.

Check For Balance

A sales meeting is an opportunity for education, team building, meeting new people, putting faces with the voices that you hear over the phone, networking and skills building. Based upon your objectives, you need to evaluate the mix of activities and points on the agenda. All knowledge transfer and no application make for a long, unproductive meeting. Consider the things that need to be learned or communicated during the event and balance those with ways to let participants practice applying them.

Look for activities that can be done in teams. Be proactive in establishing teams so that you can leverage common points of interest or need, such as geographic territories or industries.

Timelines Should Be Realistic

In today's age of multiple forms of electronic communication, clients don't change their expectations of response or attention just because you are at a sales meeting. With this in mind, think through time requirements of the "real job" during the event. Being productive doesn't mean that you have to have something on the agenda for every minute of every hour.

Prioritize topics so that you are focused on the things that help meet your objectives. So often, we hear comments like "We just don't have enough time" or "We have to put so-and-so on the agenda – they are always on the agenda for the sales meeting". It is much easier to analyze the need and usefulness of each topic and presenter if you have established your objectives and commit to aligning the agenda of the event with those objectives.

Use Your Own Examples

While this is a great opportunity to set direction or springboard activities that you will carry into the new sales year, it is also a great opportunity to highlight accomplishments and individuals. Even with a forward focus, incorporate past year's experiences as testimonials or proof statements. Highlight significant wins. Personalize stories and examples that emphasize the accomplishments of team members.

Think about the possibilities for return on investment of time and money. You can make a sales meeting an important part of the launch of your sales year, or as a mid-year checkpoint, but it requires focus. Given that "people are distracted or preoccupied 75% of the time" and "few can recall 50% of what they just heard"¹ it is important that your emphasis is clear and that your delivery is consistent and repetitive.

Clearly defining what you expect out of your sales meeting helps you to analyze whether your goals and objectives were met and to evaluate the significance and value that it brought to your sales team.

¹ Creative Living, Northwestern Mutual, August 2002