

- Ever been to sales meetings that were boring, uninspiring and a waste of time and money?

Fifth in a Series

The perfect sales meeting in the eyes of a rep

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This article is intended for manufacturers, distributors, and representatives who have conducted sales meetings where attendees left thinking to themselves, "That was one of the worst meetings I have ever attended." But, unfortunately, no one was ever told. What a depressing thought! We have all been there and done that. The purpose of this article is to help manufacturers conduct more perfect sales meetings.

We have all left sales meetings on a "high." Wasn't it a great feeling? You were just educated and motivated and can't wait to get back on the playing field in front of customers and competitors. You are anxious to face the challenges of the day.

Conversely, you probably have been to meetings that were a total waste of everybody's precious time and money. The problem is that no one had the courage or guts to share their true feelings.

Surely there was a critique sheet, but you wanted to be polite and politically correct. Unfortunately, you completed it with positive strokes. Obviously, you helped no one – especially yourself or, more importantly, the host. The result is that we continue to attend the same dull meetings void of stimulation and quality content. Perfect sales meetings are supposed to inspire and light a fire. They provide product and application knowledge and advise salespeople of competitive edges. Most of all, they help us sell more and do jobs more effectively.

PURPOSE

The perfect sales meeting always has a purpose and a goal. There are a multitude of reasons for having them and below are listed just a few:

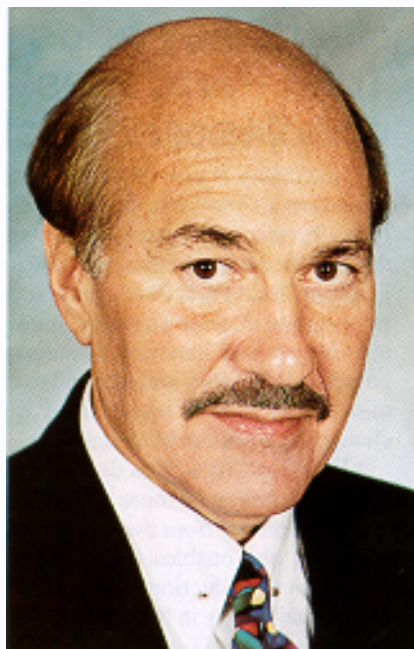
1. Motivation for greater sales

2. Product line training
3. Launching new products
4. Improvement of selling skills
5. Sales promotions
6. Advise state of the company

Some companies aggressively change their agenda from year to year, while others maintain the same old format. Perfect meeting planners always strive for perfection and change is, therefore, essential. The most highly rated presenters and their subject matter are retained, and simply updated. Those sessions that were poorly rated are replaced or given a fresh spin with more dynamic speakers. Remember—just because someone has product expertise does not mean he is best equipped to present it.

PLANNING

The perfect sales meeting is planned just after the last one ended. Why? Because the good, the bad and the ugly are still fresh in everyone's mind. Perfect meetings are a collaborative effort. This means that sales and marketing management personnel play an important role. But, to do it right



HARRY ABRAMSON

salespeople, especially reps, should have an input. PLEASE ASK THEM!

The Rep Council is a great resource for this kind of feedback because the rep members have experienced what their other principals have done, both right and wrong. The direct sales force is another resource, but they typically have a narrower perspective of matters. In other words, they may be too myopic. If you don't have an in-house meeting planner or rent one, I suggest that the perfect principal use all the resources available. If a manufacturer doesn't consult with the pros, there is a strong possibility that he will have a plain old vanilla meeting – or worse yet, "a lousy one."

WHO ATTENDS?

The simple answer is "anyone who can benefit from the meeting." Too many companies miss the boat by only inviting outside sales personnel. For many products and services, the inside sales staff members are key "drivers," but are never invited. Compliments to the forward-thinking sales management team who recognizes this shortcoming and has changed their ways.

Barring budget constraints, there are no limits on the number of attendees and, if there are, the rep has the option to pay for additional staff. If there are limitations, the manufacturer invites minimally the trainers (product managers), the head coach (principal) or sales manager. One of the traits of a perfect principal is that he has an annual training program for all new rep employees as well as new rep firms. It doesn't take a genius to realize the best-informed sales force is the most productive.

REP/DISTRIBUTOR MEETINGS

How about a colossal clash of egos and selfish interests? The perfect principal is very wary of joint meetings. History shows that it can work with the limited participation of distributor product managers, who are there for product and application knowledge. If distribution management is present, they may want to discuss issues of policy, margins, referrals, returns, etc. – NOT GOOD! If the principal insists on having both distributors and reps, they should include distributor-specific breakout sessions to satisfy their interests and not bore the other attendees

SCHEDULING

The perfect principal uses common sense when scheduling sales meetings and it's typically during the first quarter of the calendar year. Late Q2 or early Q3 often conflict with vacation schedules and late Q4 overlaps the holiday season. To make matters worse, it's expensive and difficult to travel during uncertain winter conditions. Some of the worst meeting scheduling takes place at trade shows like the Electronic Distribution Show. Meeting conflicts are in abundance and everyone is in a state of multi-processing overload. Guess what? It's only going to get worse if manufacturers continue to cut commission rates and force reps to take on more lines. (See "The Perfect Principal" article in EDT March 2001 issue.)

WHERE?

Who cares where, as long as it is a place that is convenient and free from too much diversion? Considering today's business climate, amenities like golf, tennis and beaches are not the order of the day. Reps would rather have the frills converted to full commission rates and/or incentives. Much like I stated in the article on the "Perfect regional sales manager" – who cares where the location is as long as the job gets done? The facility should be of a high enough standard that no one feels compromised in terms of their creature comforts.

DOUBLING UP

FORGET IT! If a manufacturer can't host a meeting with single rooms, they should wait until they can afford it. I don't sleep with strangers at home, so why start now? If the facility has a limited number of rooms, don't go there! The perfect principal is considerate of accommodations. They realize that attendees do not want to hear a roommate's body noises or share an odiferous bathroom – **GET MY DRIFT?** There are light sleepers, insomniacs, early risers and numerous other considerations that make for bad bedfellows.

THE KICK OFF

The perfect sales meeting always starts on a positive note – it's crucial. If you just had a great year of sales, congratulations are in order. If the year wasn't that great, everyone enthusiastically expresses great optimism. This type of attitude elevates the pulse and positively conditions the environment.

At the perfect sales meeting all of the speakers have positive attitudes and it's contagious. Threats and ultimatums are never part of the perfect sales meeting. These matters are discussed one-on-one with the poor performers.

TUTORIAL VS INTERACTIVE SESSIONS

There are some positives about the tutorial aspect of any meeting, but there are limits. A perfect sales meeting has a balance of tutorial sessions and lively interactive breakouts. The topics are well conceived by the principal with solicited input from the field. Unfortunately, too many manufacturers are a victim of habit and have the same style meetings year after year. Tutorial style sales meetings are yesterday's news and interactive breakouts are what's "in." Incidentally, "role playing" is also dead. It was a seventies thing.

CASE STUDIES

Case studies can be good examples of how to overcome the sales barriers. A few can be sprinkled into every sales meeting, but not too many. I believe it is a better exercise to ask the participants how they would overcome certain objections and then have a round table discussion. That way all the ideas can be shared at the breakout session and the best at the general session with appropriate awards.

COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS

The perfect principal has an understanding of what they do better than their competitors. This applies to every company in every industry. These advantages must be shared with the field sales force in order for them to do a more perfect selling job. Therefore, it is my belief that every worthwhile sales meeting has a competitive analysis session that reviews all of the competition's strengths and weaknesses. This information is essential to answer buyer's or engineer's question, "Why should I buy from you?" or "What do you do better than my other sources?"

CRITIQUE SHEETS

I have been to hundreds of meetings and have completed more critique sheets than I care to remember. Essentially, the questions are all the same and I often wonder how carefully they are read. It is a rare event when participants who disclose their name are contacted for additional input. If critique sheets are not going to be read and acted upon, manufacturers should not

ask for them. By the same token, when they are read and if the comment was construed as negative or critical, the perfect principal does not over-react or recriminate. The perfect partnership is open and honest regarding all matters.

WHO PAYS WHAT?

It is usual and customary for the representative to pay for their transportation while the principal pays for the hotel and meals. It is expected that principals will provide single rooms at a quality facility. How many representative participants attend is a sensitive subject. This is because many principals have lowered their commission rates and, therefore, have presented their representatives with the financial challenge of running their business for less. In other words, it's difficult for many rep firms to send as many people as they have previously – especially in a soft economy.

PRESENTATION MATERIAL

The perfect principal is mindful that each participant should be given presentation material to take back to the field. Binders are fine, but duplicating them for an entire sales force is expensive and cumbersome. The obvious answer is to present the entire sales meeting curriculum on a CD ROM. If manufacturers are not doing this, they simply are not "up-to-date." CD ROM's are inexpensive and can be duplicated by virtually any high tech rep firm.

AWARDS

Recognition is a positive reinforcement for the top performing reps and an incentive for the balance of the sales force. Unfortunately, too many manufacturers tend to hand out awards based simply on sales volume and do not factor consideration for market share achievements. In other words, how can a clear thinking sales manager expect a rep covering the Rocky Mountains to outsell the rep organization in northern or southern California? Everything should be scaled appropriately. Award ceremonies can be short and sweet, not long and drawn out like a retirement dinner. The presenters may be having fun, but the audience starts to squirm. The perfect sales meeting has a well-balanced schedule of events.

PRODUCT DISPLAYS

PowerPoint presentations are great and so are pictures of products. However, it is always helpful to touch and feel the products. Therefore, a display

table is beneficial – especially if customer service people are in attendance. Some of them have never seen products that their principal or employer manufacturers.

QUIZ

Is a quiz a bad thing? I don't think so! When participants are told that there is going to be a test, they tend to be more attentive. It shouldn't be difficult, but one that covers the highlights of the meeting – especially the product and application presentations. More importantly, it would be nice if each participant had a diploma to take home or had one sent to him. Most reps have a "feature wall" and would proudly display it and consider it to be another credential in their portfolio.

KEEP IT BRIEF

Presentation sessions should not be more than 60-90 minutes. Think back to when you were in school and how you started to lose focus on the long drawn out presentations. The same applies to sales meetings. Also, I believe that 15-20 minutes should be left at the end of each session for questions and answers. If there is a lack of questions, the perfect presenter interacts with the attendees and starts asking them questions.

PHONE AND REFRESHMENT BREAKS

The perfect meeting planner realizes that every participant has to communicate with customers, principals and their office. Accordingly, break times should be longer than 10 minutes and at least 20 minutes for them to effectively communicate. Incidentally, your cell phones should be turned off before going into the meeting room – IT IS COMMON COURTESY!

PERFECT SLIDES

Perfect slide presentations, i.e. PowerPoint, are not too busy. The fancy, special effects can get old quickly. It's the content that counts, not the cuteness. If you want to keep your audience awake, do it with humor or by asking questions and not with a dancing alphabet.

THE CLOSE

There is no better way to conclude a perfect sales meeting than to have a great motivational speaker. Just when the audience's energy level starts to dwindle, the speaker turns everyone on with a dynamic message. He tells us

why the company that we represent is the very best and that we can sell more by appropriately directing our energies. Perfect motivators share some new sales strategy and tips. There is no better way to wrap up a meeting than having a spectacular conclusion.

SUMMARY

Salespeople love great meetings and they truly consider them to be an event. Why – because they are exceptional. Ordinary meetings are not memorable. Meetings aren't great because of the location, decor, golf or a big budget.

Fabulous meetings are remembered because of their content. The perfect manufacturer strives to make every meeting a true event. They strive to have all participants leave with the thought, "This was one of the best meetings I have ever attended."

If you have been to a disappointing sales meeting lately, why not send the host a copy of this article? They may not know if it's a compliment or a criticism, but after a while I'm sure they'll figure it out.