



# Sales Training in the Lab Industry: Is It *Really* Necessary?

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There exists an interesting question for those in upper management responsible for the organic growth of their lab: Do you think your sales staff should undergo occasional sales training? One could say—without trained salespeople—business growth devolves to serendipity. Additionally, lack of continuous training could potentially jeopardize the lab’s reputation in the community.

I have heard diverse answers when posing the above training question. Some managers/lab owners understand the importance of having periodic sales “tune-ups.” To this point, John Wooden, the well-known UCLA basketball coach, once said, “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.”

But on the other side of the coin comes a grumbling comment Ebenezer Scrooge might well have said: “Bah-humbug. My reps had sales training with their previous employer. Once is sufficient.” Or “They have lots of industry experience. They know what they’re doing. There’s no need to spend precious time and money on instruction.”

## **The Naked Truth**

Of the many commercial labs and hospital lab outreach supervisors I’ve spoken to over the past fifteen years, a few said they occasionally provide some type of sales training to sharpen their reps’ tools. The other responses are something akin to Mr. Scrooge’s comments (minus the “bah-humbug” colloquialism). Undeniably, industry familiarity remains helpful when marketing lab services, but it raises the question: Does experience equal aptitude? Certainly not universally. Simply reflect on John Wooden’s axiom: “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.”

### **Training: What and When?**

Let's assume lab management recognizes the significance of ongoing sales development. However, the term "sales development" requires definition, because it crosses divergent paths:

(1) Industry-related (e.g., addition of new tests to the menu, methodology changes, transport supplies, billing, connectivity updates, medical society announcements, compliance, competition review, etc.).

(2) Sales-related (e.g., sales strategy, solution selling, insight selling, closing, how to build effective client relationships, overcoming objections, territory management, etc.).

Labs give an indoctrination to new employees in the first few days of employment. Contrary to this on-boarding education, management may either ignore strategic and tactical sales instruction or delay its implementation. After all, doesn't this new employee already arrive with golden, hard-wired sales techniques? Some lab leaders, however, understand the value of providing an important sales curriculum. Without delay, it sets sales behavior expectations, which could be disparate from his/her former *modus operandi*.

Nationally regarded sales experts recommend annual strategy and tactics review. Additional subjects incorporate updated competitive strengths and weaknesses, how to maximize client relationships, objection handling, and territory management.

Today, many professions—financial planners, lawyers, healthcare providers, etc.—have mandatory continuing education. It became obvious that, without it, people grew "rusty", and they lacked the necessary information to maintain their professional status. Given this rational philosophy, I ask this question: Why should the sales profession be treated any differently? Advancing representative skills equates to an on-going process. One cannot expect perfection by attending a single class or having a quick discussion. It's far better to practice with peers in a safe environment as opposed to inelegantly fumble around in front of prospects.

### **Who Should Train?**

Large commercial labs have established their own training department due to the number of salespeople. However, many smaller labs and hospitals with active lab outreach programs are, understandably, devoid of this resource. Unfortunately, they expect their representatives to intuitively discover improved sales techniques on their own using trial-and-error.

Lab vendors (reagent and analyzer manufacturers, IT connectivity companies, etc.) may be a resource for educating certain industry topics. For sales instruction, a qualified employee or manager can accept the training responsibility, or the lab can seek an outside consultant familiar with the industry.

It needs mentioning that well-known national sales training programs offer very good selling concepts; however, the instructors (typically) are unfamiliar with lab intricacies, the important strategic background questions to ask, and lab nomenclature. Lab reps force themselves to contextualize the material within their own framework. This reasoning describes why a generic trainer tends to make learning more challenging. If an instructor understands the testing referral business and reveals real-life experiences, the listener can easily follow and appreciate the discussions more efficiently.

### **One More Ingredient: Coaching**

To produce lasting gains in sales performance, one cannot find a substitute for practice, repetition, and reinforcement. But practice does not transpose into excellence *unless* someone gives appropriate feedback. If you hit golf balls on a practice course for an hour, there stands a strong likelihood you could do something a little better with your stance, grip, or swing. The trouble is, we can't see ourselves, and, even if we could, we may not be knowledgeable enough to diagnose what's happening. When selling lab services, having an experienced manager occasionally co-ride with a rep embodies an excellent solution. If your situation offers no internal coaching resource, hiring an outside expert for co-rides (or, at a minimum, afford consultative phone calls) can provide invaluable feedback. Without it, management simply hopes and expects their field staff will progress on their own. The word "hope" does little to gain market superiority and amounts to the antithesis of developing a superior sales strategy.

### **Summary**

The building blocks of a business development plan consist of understanding your business goals *and* training objectives. A good *business* strategy contains *sales* strategies that must be aligned. Sales education equates to a bifurcation of both industry knowledge and sales strategies/tactics—not one or the other. Instruction should not be a one-time occurrence. An individual knowledgeable about marketing within the lab industry (internal or outsourced) offers the most effective information transfer. Finally, in-the-field coaching remains essential to confirm reps competently utilize the taught principles during their client encounters.

It is no secret education costs money—but ignorance can cost a lot more. Most lab managers agree that a good investment opportunity rests with sales training. When done properly, even stingy Mr. Scrooge would not need three ghosts to convince him that tutoring salespeople capitalizes on a company's greatest hidden asset: The untapped potential of its sales force.

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