



SALES + MARKETING

Don't Train in Vain

Four keys to driving behavior change in your sales force

By Chris Morgan, Namita Kalyan and Dan Frey



Impact where it matters.™

We've all been there. At the beginning of the year we set our sights on something that we want to change in our behavior. We buy an instrument, sign up for the gym or start a diet, setting ourselves on a road paved with good intentions. But we all know that the outcome is far from certain. If we manage to stay the course, then the rewards can be huge. We can take pride in the new, improved selves that we see in the mirror each day. Sometimes, however, life gets in the way, and six months later, nothing has really happened.

Sales organizations often face the same challenges. They set out on training programs with ambitious goals for changes in performance. Some achieve these goals, but others—even those with very similar objectives—don't live up to expectations.

But the opportunity is there. ZS recently conducted the [Explorer Study](#), an extensive quantitative and qualitative analysis of sales force effectiveness (SFE) initiatives. The study looked at more than 800 data points from a wide range of survey respondents, literature sources, interviews with SFE industry leaders and internal ZS case studies. At a high level, the Explorer Study results indicate that, across industries, companies that invest in even a single SFE initiative can increase their revenue by an average of 4 to 8%, and companies that invest more programmatically across a variety of SFE initiatives see average increases in revenue of 9 to 10% and up to 30%.

Among specific SFE categories, the study found that sales processes and training are the most common investment targets—for understandable reasons (see figure 1). Nearly any sales force initiative will involve some kind of training or process improvement to implement changes in the field.

PERCENTAGE OF COMPANIES INVESTING IN EACH CATEGORY AS PART OF A SALES TRANSFORMATION

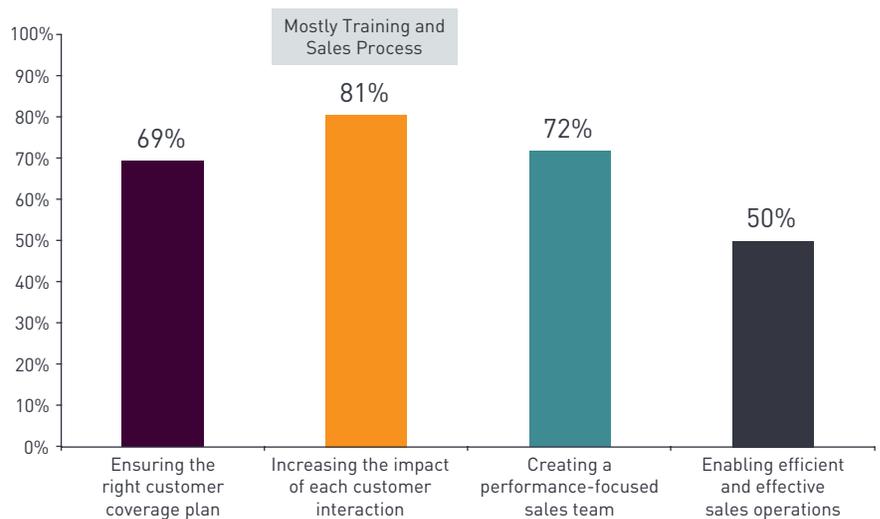
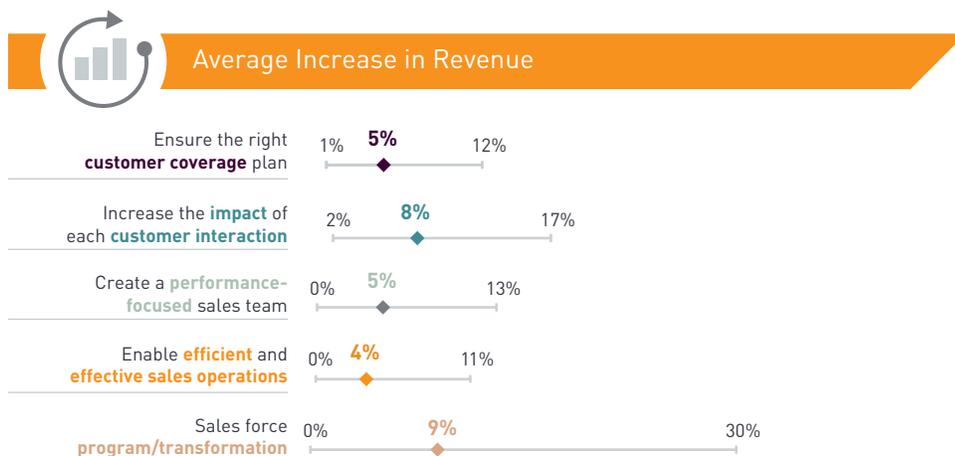


Figure 1: Nearly any sales force initiative will involve some kind of training or process improvement to implement changes in the field, so it's understandable that these are common investment targets.



The companies that miss the mark tend to—with apologies to The Clash—train in vain. They see training as the silver bullet for increasing the impact of a customer interaction, but they roll out skill building as a one-time, event-based effort.

Moreover, efforts that were aimed at increasing the impact of each customer interaction, like training and sales process improvements, saw the largest payoff, with average one-year increases in revenue of 8%. Critically, however, they also saw the largest variation, with revenue hikes ranging from 2 to 17% (see figure 2). In other words, companies can generate real results if they get certain initiatives—like training—right, but they can also miss the mark badly.



Results shown within one standard deviation.

Figure 2: Efforts that were aimed at increasing the impact of each customer interaction saw the largest average payoff.

The companies that miss the mark tend to—with apologies to The Clash—train in vain. They see training as the silver bullet for increasing the impact of a customer interaction, but they roll out skill building as a one-time, event-based effort. The focus, instead, should be on improving how companies roll out these initiatives in order to achieve true behavior change and, ultimately, customer impact. In our experience, achieving this behavior change is reliant on four key drivers (see figure 3).

ELEMENTS FOR DRIVING BEHAVIOR CHANGE

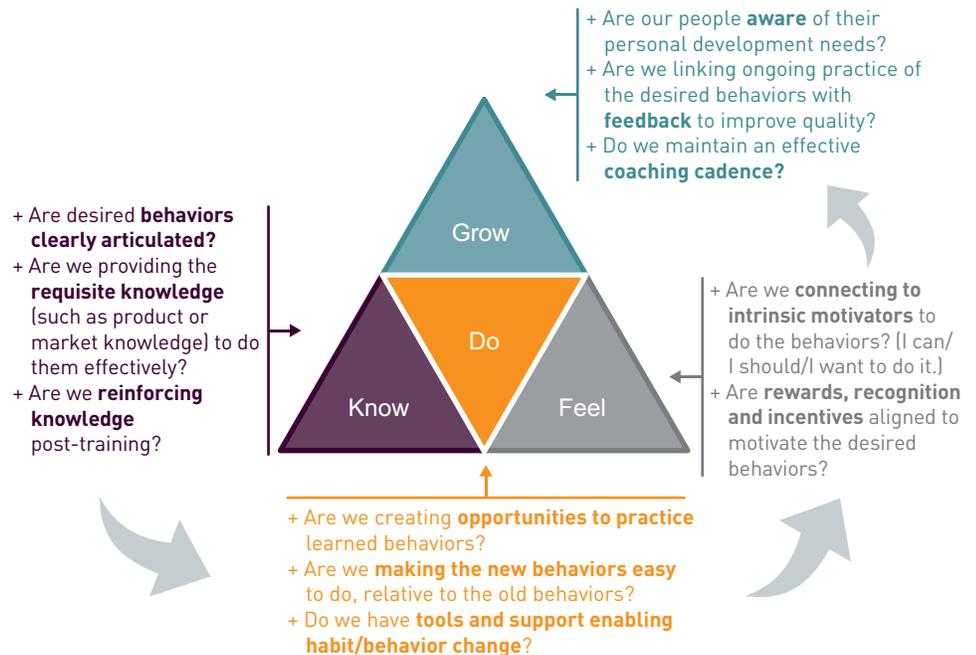


Figure 3: Rolling out skill-building initiatives to achieve true behavior change is reliant on four key drivers.

- + **Know:** First, organizations need to make sure that the sales force understands what's expected of them. That means clearly spelling out new target behaviors, along with the underlying rationale for why they're needed. In addition, organizations need to train reps in the specific skills that they need to carry out those behaviors. For example, if a company is rolling out a new mobile tool, it has to train reps on how to use the tool, with intuitive explanations about how all of its functions work, how to access help if employees get stuck and how to handle any other reasonable contingency. Most companies address this basic foundation during initial, quite engaging training sessions, but they fail to reinforce it over time.

The most important practice happens not in the training event, but in the field when applied to real problems. But the real world is a busy place, and reps face a maelstrom of day-to-day concerns that can crowd out their intent to practice new behaviors.

- + **Feel:** Second, change initiatives should address the emotional component of how and why employees act as they do. It isn't enough to simply explain a new process or behavior and order employees to start using it. We need to create an emotional response to the change. They need to feel what this will mean for them or, even better, for their customers. Organizations need to understand the intrinsic motivators that affect employee behavior and use those to create situations in which employees want to change. They may need to sell behaviors, convincing sales teams of the WIIFM (What's in it for me?) by highlighting success stories of top performers, helping to create self-reinforcing personal successes or creating a group identity that generates emotional peer pressure.

A critical aspect of this step is identifying and eliminating any barriers that may prevent sales reps from embracing the change, such as misaligned incentives. For example, if the company is trying to emphasize the quality of customer interactions yet is still structuring bonuses based on the volume of sales calls, that sends a mixed signal about what it considers most important.

- + **Do:** Third, organizations need to allow sales professionals to practice new behaviors instead of merely hearing them described during a training session. Often, learners disengage because they already know what they should be doing. The issue isn't a knowledge gap; it's a practice gap. Reps need to put new ideas into practice both during and after these training sessions. Most salespeople don't think themselves into a new way of acting; they act themselves into a new way of thinking. Don't describe a new mobile tool to them. Instead, let them try using it during mock sales calls.

The most important practice happens not in the training event, but in the field when applied to real problems. But the real world is a busy place, and reps face a maelstrom of day-to-day concerns that can crowd out their intent to practice new behaviors. It's all too easy to slip back into business as usual, so organizations need to provide tools and enablers that reinforce the new behaviors until they become easier and more comfortable than the old habits.

CASE STUDY

Driving Practice in the Field

Many sales organizations are seeking to upgrade to a more value-oriented sales model, such as key account management (KAM). This represents a massive change challenge. KAM requires:

- + New and challenging behaviors
- + Significant planning and thinking that happens in between customer interactions
- + A full team to deliver solutions, not just individuals

Each of these features raises the importance of practice to develop the right skills, and yet each of them makes it more challenging to actually make this practice happen.

One of our clients recognized this challenge and built their behavioral change program around in-field practice and coaching rather than conventional training. A group of coaches were selected to support this program, coming from a variety of roles in the organization. Their job was to focus on a limited number of accounts (one or two per account team) and to help facilitate practice and provide ongoing feedback to the teams.

To help them achieve this goal, we developed a series of short exercises (“accelerators”), which were designed to be used by teams to work on their real customer problems. The coaches learned when to use these exercises, how to blend them with the work of the team and how to use them as coaching opportunities.

By pursuing this program of purposeful practice, the teams made progress not just in skills, but also with their customers. Wins with the focus accounts increased and, at the same time, the behaviors learned by practicing on these accounts started to percolate to the rest of the business. As one account team commented, “We’ve always known that we need to work as a team, but this is the first time we’ve ever known how to put that into practice.”

- + **Grow:** Finally, organizations need to understand that training will not succeed through a standardized approach that treats all employees as having identical needs. Instead, managers should understand the unique development goals and requirements of each member of the sales team, set individual goals

for advancement, and help them make continuous improvements over time. The objective is not to get everyone over a common threshold, but instead to make sure that each employee focuses on his specific objectives so that he can grow based on his own needs. This kind of capability-building approach requires a greater commitment of time and resources compared to a one-size-fits-all approach, but it leads to much better results.

CASE STUDY

Personal Development in Action

While field forces often have a reputation of wanting total autonomy, that doesn't mean that they don't have a strong desire for self-improvement.

One client tested this idea, identifying behaviors that reps and managers could choose, individually, to work on. These behaviors had been identified as routines or daily activities that were foundational to success: for example, planning call objectives or preparing for coaching interactions. These behaviors were well-known to be best practices, but just like regular exercise or eating healthy foods, many people weren't doing them. Armed with mobile self-tracking, 40% of the participants mastered at least one of these disciplines, which meant engaging in that chosen behavior for 21 straight days.

Behavioral literature suggests that the actual discipline may be irrelevant. The act of building discipline feeds on itself, making it easier for participants to be disciplined in other areas. Perhaps that's why, in just one quarter, those who mastered a discipline improved their sales attainment over their historical averages by 16%. At the same time, participants indicated that the tools used created additional touch points with their managers, and 72% said that coaching improved as a result, becoming more frequent and more collaborative.

In sum, the Explorer Study shows the potential impact that organizations can achieve through initiatives aimed at increasing the impact of each customer interaction, like sales training, but it also shows that such initiatives can be highly variable. Based on our experience, companies need to go beyond highly engaging but largely event-based training sessions and make sure that the intended behavior change takes root. By focusing on the four drivers of behavior change—know, do, feel and grow—companies can make sure that they aren't training in vain and can use capability building as a tool to make sure that SFE initiatives generate the greatest possible payoff.

About the Authors



Chris Morgan is a principal at ZS and leads the global talent management practice from the London office. He has also headed the EU sales practice and worked out of ZS's Frankfurt and Chicago offices. He has a special focus on overcoming the challenges of translating business strategies into local actions through the complexities of sales and marketing organizations. Chris has worked in over 20 countries across all continents in the pharmaceutical, healthcare, airline, industrial products and communications sectors. He has led numerous root-and-branch sales and marketing capability transformation projects, including many pan-Europe or global projects for a range of blue-chip companies, and is a frequent guest speaker at international symposia and U.K. business schools.



Namita Kalyan is an associate principal based in ZS's Philadelphia office. She is the global lead for customer engagement excellence within ZS's talent management practice, and her focus has been in sales force strategy, design and effectiveness. She has worked with Fortune 100 companies to evaluate and improve sales manager and rep effectiveness, including multi-country sales force training.



Dan Frey is a principal at ZS's San Mateo, Calif., office. He joined ZS in 2002 and has led ZS's China business since 2011. Dan has led and executed several hundred projects addressing a broad range of sales and marketing challenges, including sales force effectiveness, organizational design, resource allocation, incentive design, customer segmentation, and capability building for marketing and innovation. Dan has been a featured speaker on Chinese healthcare reform at PharmaChina, co-authored two publications on healthcare sales and marketing issues, and chaired an Eyeformpharma conference on patient adherence and engagement. Dan has an MBA from Northwestern University and a B.A. from Princeton University.



About ZS

ZS is the world's largest firm focused exclusively on helping companies improve overall performance and grow revenue and market share, through end-to-end sales and marketing solutions – from customer insights and strategy to analytics, operations and technology. More than 4,500 ZS professionals in 22 offices worldwide draw on deep industry and domain expertise to deliver impact for clients across multiple industries. To learn more, visit www.zsassociates.com or follow us on Twitter and LinkedIn.



**For more information,
please contact:**

ZS Associates
+1 855.972.4769
inquiry@zsassociates.com

www.zsassociates.com

© 2016 ZS Associates

06-16