

Sales Certification Improves Sales Results, Client Relationships

by Mike Morton

In the face of chaotic markets and relentless change, your company's selling organization is the key to competitive advantage. That is why sales leaders deliver sales training that improves sales operations and product knowledge, enhances sales skills, and increases industry awareness. But enlightened sales leaders are taking training one step further—to sales certification. The results show that certification drives more consistent performance in all businesses throughout the sales process.



Certification Process

- Assess current sales teams' skills and behaviors to identify gaps
- Analyze current wins and losses to identify sales team skills and knowledge gaps
- Develop a playbook that outlines critical sales plays
- Deliver a certification program for each play that incorporates:
 - Self-guided or instructor-led training
 - Knowledge assessment (test)
 - Industry-specific case studies and practical hands-on role-plays that test both knowledge and ability to demonstrate and apply learnings
 - Coaching as required

Why certify your salespeople?

In our work with sales certification clients, we have identified three common reasons why they implement a sales certification program.

- **Their customers are demanding a minimum level of sales competency that quickly recognizes their pain and identifies potential solutions.** Executive dialogue is focused on elevating sales force and sales management competency levels that discover and solve customer problems.
- **Their new product portfolios are not being sold.** For too many companies, product proliferation has become the scourge of salespeople. They sell what they know. And as companies increase in service maturity, they are adding more services to their product portfolio to boost overall customer value and penetration. As these solutions proliferate, many are being undersold.
- **Their target markets are not being optimized because their salespeople don't know the industry.** Perhaps the salespeople are new. Or perhaps the industry is going through changes. Successful salespeople know they must keep abreast of trends and changes in their industry—and adapt to them—in order to stay on top.

What's the process for designing a certification program?

There are a number of factors to consider when designing your certification program.

1. A current assessment of your sales teams' skills and behaviors is the obvious place to start. Identifying their skills and knowledge gaps will help you design a program that addresses shortfalls in their skills, strategic capability, and technical understanding. Talking to your customers about their perception of your sales team provides valuable input.
2. Identify your customers' trends and challenges. What critical sales plays would appropriately respond to them? When your teams are at their best, they're delivering value that can be demonstrated—throughout the sales process and during implementation of your solution.
3. Capture these plays in a brief, easy-to-reference playbook that summarizes your company's value proposition and competitive position for your salespeople. Successful playbooks include simulation how-to tools like great questions to ask your customer, responses to questions frequently asked by your customer, and a battlecard for managing competitive threats.
4. Testing for each play ensures your salespeople have mastered the key concepts in specific selling situations. Testing may include individual tests for knowledge, evaluated customer role plays, and, potentially, management-observed interactions with your customers.



What are the benefits to your salespeople?

- Sales certification indicates a high level of professionalism among your sales organization and provides another layer of courage for your team.
- Your certified salespeople have a competitive advantage that sets them apart from other coworkers. They are able to do what your company asks them to do. They have a clear understanding of the sales process and a baseline knowledge of what play to run.
- Certification engages your sales team as a unit, aligned to achieve your company's goals. Their dedication to continuous improvement demonstrates leadership.
- It creates competition—and pride—among sales units. Their technical mastery and successful completion of a measured competency program sets a competitive benchmark, increasing their visibility and enhancing their reputation internally.
- An ancillary benefit of certification is that it makes your sales managers be better coaches. For the program to be successful, they have to ensure that their salespeople “listen, practice, do,” not just attend a training course.

What are the benefits to your customers?

- Sales certification for your salespeople means your customers are working with the best in their field.
- Your certified salespeople challenge the status quo. Their customer lens is focused on value, return, and business relationships, not product, price, and commodity. As the value of your sellers' relationship and the value of your offerings become more intertwined, possibilities open up for an even greater exchange of value for both parties.
- Your salespeople do not waste your customer's time. Equipped with comprehensive sales and technical skills, they put their solution together in a way that fits your customer's needs—and sets you apart.
- Your salespeople know what to sell. It's no longer about components. They have the competencies and resources to design and deliver products, services, and complete solutions that affect positive business outcomes. They meet your customer's unique business needs by selling from your entire portfolio.

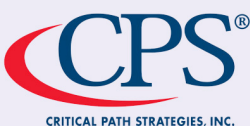
What's the financial impact of a sales certification program?

The importance of certification cannot be overemphasized. It drives consistent performance in all businesses throughout the sales process—and drives value in the marketplace. It opens up opportunities for your newest solutions.

In a recent study conducted by HP, sales team members who obtained their Accredited Sales Professional certification achieved 15 percent higher sales within three months of certification, and 25 percent higher sales than non-certified peers within six months. This increase of 15 to 25 percent in sales equates to substantial return on investment for the individual and the company.

Professionals who are trained, knowledgeable, and certified deliver more effective end-to-end solutions to customers, building credibility, loyalty, and, ultimately, significant increases in sales and productivity.

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