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Skills Enhancement, Solution Development, Management Rhythm: Enhancing Sales at Acxiom

“My desire is for our company to become a revered and feared sales organization. Revered by those in the sales community, or those who want to be in it, and feared by our competitors.” Critical Path Strategies took Sales Operations Group Leader Bee Kirk’s words to heart in designing a comprehensive training program that equips his salespeople with a customized sales process, enhanced selling skills, and solution development knowledge.

CPS was chosen to deliver the Acxiom training because of its:

- Responsiveness
- Broad experience
- Best-practices-based training focus
- “Acxiom-speak” customization

Business Challenge. Acxiom Corporation creates and delivers customer and information management solutions for many of the largest, most respected companies in the world. Founded in 1969, the company has an impressive growth profile fueled, in large part, by the onset of direct marketing for pre-screen credit card offers and customer-focused marketing applications.

However, Acxiom’s sales process had not kept pace with its aggressive growth, resulting in the absence of a common sales culture. Strategically, the company needed the capability to manage, synchronize, and coordinate customer initiatives across all channels for top-flight performance. Acxiom gave this charge to 27-year IBM veteran Bee Kirk, who’s been on board now for a year.

How CPS Helped. After a rigorous selection process, Kirk chose Critical Path Strategies (CPS) to help build a sales culture around consultative and solution selling. He was struck by CPS’ responsiveness, its broad experience in delivering best practices to sales organizations, and how the company custom tailored a curriculum to include “Acxiom-speak” and simulated Acxiom clients.

Kirk and CPS agreed to achieve two objectives:

- Arm the sales organization with tools and skills that help close big deals quickly
- Equip the sales organization to recognize and act on opportunities for cross-selling and up-selling





Professional Sales Training is aimed at engaging CXOs and emphasizes the following areas:

- Account vision
- Team collaboration
- Effective communication
- Sales call preparation
- Role-playing
- Financial selling

Solution Selling Training builds on the fundamentals of the Professional Sales Training class. It helps participants learn how to:

- Create, track, and pursue a complex, multi-faceted, end-to-end solution for an Acxiom client
- Develop the skills to sell a compelling solution that crosses multiple lines of business
- Engage support teams to deliver solutions to clients

CPS designed and is delivering a two-phased program that encompasses Professional Sales Training (PST) and Solution Sales Training (SST). The hard-hitting, fast-paced, four-day-long PST emphasizes account vision, team collaboration, effective communication, sales call preparation, role-playing, and financial selling—all aimed at engaging CXOs. Participants develop real-world account plans, leaving the course armed with strategies and action plans they can implement immediately for current opportunities.

The five-day SST, completed by participants two months later, builds on the fundamentals of the PST class. It employs a process structure and case study to teach participants how to create, track, and pursue a complex, multi-faceted, end-to-end solution for an Acxiom client. Sellers develop the skills to sell a compelling solution that crosses multiple lines of business, and engages the support teams to deliver that solution to clients.

When asked which sales tools the participants seem to like best, Kirk points to the customer value alignment (CVA), the organizational map, and sales call role-playing. “The CVA helps them analyze their accounts in an organized way, and share them across the sales support team. The ‘Org Map’ guides them in developing a strong account plan and optimum team alignment. The use of real-world sales call scenarios brings it home for them.”

Kirk is an active participant in the training sessions, role-playing sales calls with the attendees. This has given him a serendipitous perspective about the level and type of skills that reside in the sales organization and where he needs to focus his next sales enhancement efforts.

Of the 400 sales professionals slotted to attend the training programs, over half will have completed the classroom training by the end of this summer. Recognizing the pivotal role that senior managers play in facilitating a transformation, Acxiom requires two layers of sales management to participate. They were involved in the implementation efforts from the start, and are charged with driving the change process on a daily basis.

High Performance Ahead. Too many training efforts fail because they lack consensus on what success looks like. Acxiom established its metrics up front—higher win rate, compressed sales cycle, and increased average transaction size. These metrics moving in the right direction mean top-line revenue will be increasing at a faster rate. Acxiom made sure that every salesperson and manager understands the emphasis on changing the sales culture, what the end result will look like, and their key role in it.





Since Acxiom's sales cycle averages about a year, the company doesn't expect to see hard results until 2008. In the meantime, positive anecdotal evidence reinforces the effectiveness of the training. Second-line managers have mandated use of the CPS tools, and more than half of the sales force is using them as a matter of habit. Kirk is also monitoring other metrics such as the employee satisfaction index, retention, recruiting, and customer satisfaction.

"This training is helping our people change their behavior while sharpening their skills," Kirk explained. "We have enabled them to gain a much deeper understanding of our clients, and to work more effectively to address their needs. It's a critical part of our drive to increase sales and market share, as well as expand our client relationships."

For more information about this client, contact CPS Client Services
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ABOUT CPS. Critical Path Strategies helps clients improve the effectiveness of their sales organization. Our portfolio of services addresses the strategic, organizational, and relationship issues that impact selling performance. Our powerful processes enable clients to transform their sales culture, enhance their competitive position, and accomplish strategic business initiatives. Our clients—emerging companies and members of the Fortune 500 alike—typically measure 100 to 500 times their CPS investment in revenue growth.



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