

The Importance of Team-Based  
Training in Sales Organizations  
An InfoMentis White Paper

by Steve Maul



## Abstract

This white paper is a discussion of the value of training multidisciplinary individual members of your sales organization as a team in order to increase their effectiveness, both individually and as a member of their team. This discussion might be used in the development of competency or training maps within your organization or as the basis for debate on the tradeoffs between cost of training programs and the benefits derived from them. This paper differentiates between “education”, as the transfer from one party (the teacher) to another (the student) of concepts, ideas and knowledge; and “training”, which focuses on the learning and development of skills and best practices through practice and feedback.

*“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”*

Henry Ford, Founder, Ford Motor Company

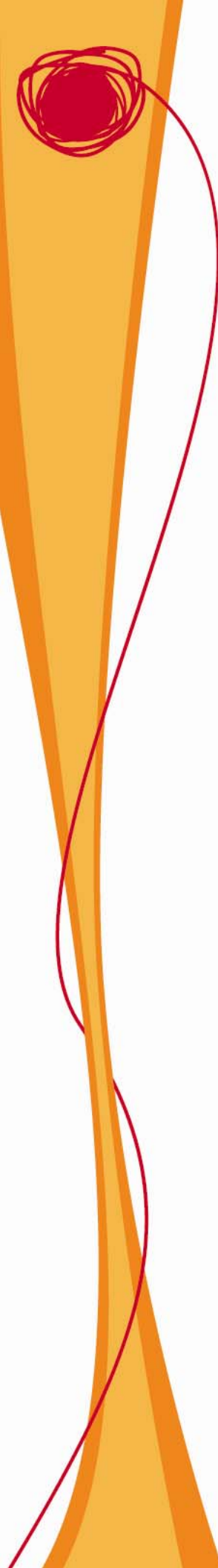
## Introduction

Research conducted by InfoMentis and others has shown that the lack of team continuity is one of the leading causes for sales failure, be it new-name business or backselling into an existing account. This lack of continuity results in multiple members of the customer-facing organizations delivering different messages to the same customer, contradicting one another and an overall perception by the customer that one hand doesn’t know what the other hand is doing inside your organization. Though everyone in a customer facing position needs to increase the degree of consistency in dealing with customers, within this paper, we’ll focus on the interaction between the sales team and the customer.

Some executives naively believe that because they hire experienced individuals into the sales force, they don’t need to train them in either skills or process. Some believe that if they can be educated quickly in product knowledge, they will quickly start producing. While that might happen occasionally, it is not wise to expect it on a regular basis. It is precisely because of their experience that you need to train them. When you hire them, they are experienced in some other company’s methods, processes, and way of doing business. They are experienced working with some other company’s products and people. Until they understand the processes and methodologies you’ve adopted for your sales teams, they will be less effective than they need to be.

While the context of this paper is focused on sales teams, the concepts discussed are validated in any number of situations and practices. As an illustrative example, the team members of the Emergency Room at your local hospital are all highly skilled professionals. Whether they are nurses, technicians or physicians, they’ve all received extensive training and certification in their own discipline. However, hospitals regularly train their ER staff on how to handle disaster or other emergency situations. Every member of the team must understand what is expected of not only themselves, but all others on the team as well. They develop a common way of interacting and conducting procedures, so lives can be saved. And, though it’s unlikely that a lack of team preparedness in a sales situation will cost lives, it can and often does cost the loss of revenue...the life blood of any company.

In many instances, war or battle analogies are used when referring to sales. In fact, Sun Tsu’s “The Art of War” is one of the most oft-quoted books when it comes to sales and competitive strategy. While contrasting selling to warfare is not a true comparison, it does invite this question: Does the entire squadron not train together, even though each member has different responsibilities? Does the infantry not train with the airborne to ensure the success of the mission? Team-based training is a time-tested foundation for optimum performance and the development of good team habits, especially where each



member of the team has differing responsibilities to execute in achieving the goal. If the team has never trained together, why would you expect them to act as a cohesive unit when they're facing the competition or the customer?

Donald Krause, in his business-based interpretation of Sun Tsu's teachings says, "All competitive advantage is based on the effective execution of plans. Poor execution ruins superior plans, Superior execution saves mediocre plans." This means that the way in which the team executes on its strategy is the most important aspect of their interaction with the customer. Superior team-based execution does not occur naturally, it will require training.

### **Obstacles to Team-Based Training**

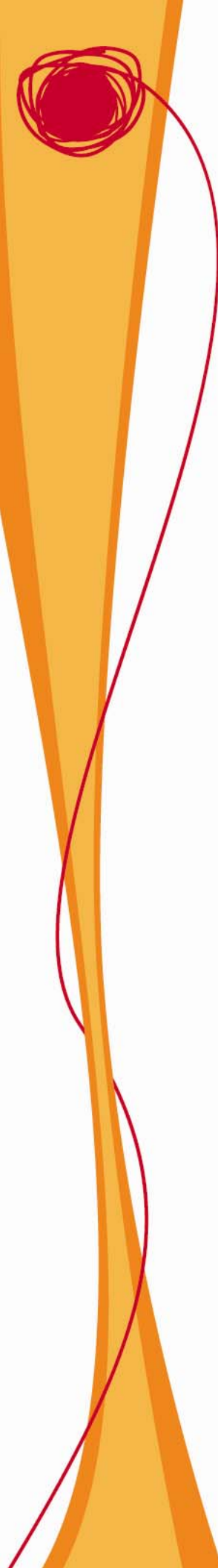
Most organizations train their people to some degree. Few embrace team-based training to the extent that will yield the optimum results: a highly functioning team that performs! Other than the excuse of hiring experienced individuals, managers and executives have a wide range of reasons that they don't have people come together in order to be trained as a team. Some of the reasons are hard facts and others are merely excuses or objections. In this paper, we will address several of these reasons and why they should be reconsidered.

- **Different members of the team have different responsibilities (e.g. sales, pre-sales, technical etc.) and can only attend role-specific training.** An example would be sending only account executives to the training on your opportunity management methodology and only pre-sales to the training on how to prepare for and deliver the solution presentation. As a fundamental concept of a team, there will almost always be different individuals with differing skills and responsibilities. It is because of these differing responsibilities that teamwork becomes more important. It is the very nature of these differences that requires each team member to know about the others' responsibilities.

To continue the example above, if only the account executive understands the opportunity management process, it's unlikely that the pre-sales professionals will be able to appropriately or adequately support the process. Similarly, if the account executive doesn't understand the steps and procedures necessary to adequately prepare and deliver the solution presentation or demonstration, there's not a very good chance they'll negotiate for the necessary steps or access nor will they likely manage the customer's expectations accordingly. The net result is frustration amongst the team members and the customers.

- **Training the team takes too much time out of the field.** This can be a legitimate issue for many companies, especially when some of the team members may be billable for their services. The opportunity cost can have a real impact on the business. However, for most sales teams, where the team members are not typically billable, the opportunity cost must be measured in what they'd be doing otherwise. Obviously, you wouldn't want to schedule a team-training event during the time of the month or quarter where they're trying to get agreements signed, but instead during other times when they can afford to take a few days to learn or hone the skills they'll need to keep generating revenue.

Another consideration is the medium used for delivering a particular subject to each member of the team. Several varieties of e-Learning (web, CD, CBT) and self-study programs are valuable ways to educate individuals in knowledge content. On the other hand, skills based training, where the individual and the team need be assessed as to their grasp of the behavior or process is best



suited to instructor-led training events. For example, everyone can learn to use the CRM application via web-based self study or tutorials. Presentation skills are harder to learn or assess in such an electronic medium.

- **Staff is shrinking and workload is increasing.** This is a potentially legitimate concern, especially during a market downturn or slowdown. However, though it may be counterintuitive, with a shrinking staff or market opportunity, the team must achieve success in every sales opportunity possible and therefore, team interaction and support becomes even more critical. When times are good, companies can get by with less than stellar sales teams. When times are tough, there's no margin for error.

*“Basically the dominant competitive weapon of the 21st century will be the education and skills of the work force.”*

Lester Thurow, former dean, MIT Sloan School of Management

### **The Value Produced by Team Cross-Training**

Above and beyond the reasoning just discussed, there are several elements of value that are generated by team training. Among them are increased productivity achieved by an improvement in empathy and communication among the team members. When one has a detailed understanding of the roles, responsibilities and challenges of others on the team, he or she will generally become more inclusive and supportive to other team members and they tend to work together more effectively. When team members communicate using a common nomenclature they work more quickly and accurately as well.

Not all the value comes in the form of internal productivity within the team. When team members act in concert with one another in front of the customer, the level of uncertainty is reduced dramatically. Trust is established by consistency and assuredness. The way a team interacts with the customer has a direct impact on the trust levels that are established by the customer with respect to the sales team.

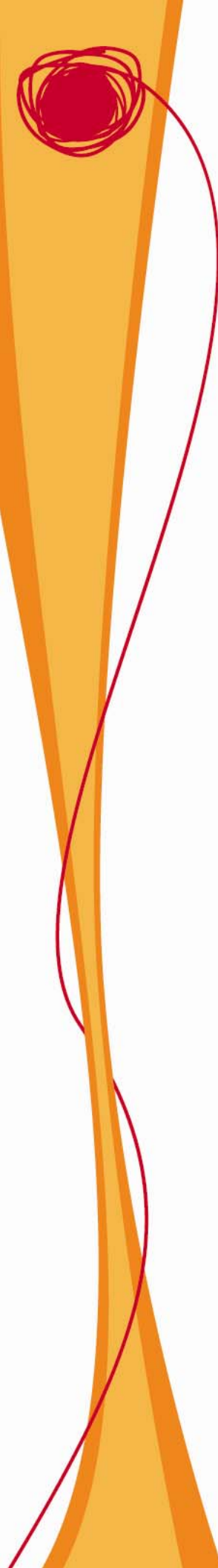
When it comes to training a sales team, most organizations are looking for one or more of the following results. Each of these results is impacted by the degree of team training that is deployed and the degree to which it is supported and reinforced in the field following the training workshop.

**Strategic Results:** When sales teams work well together they help you:

- Retain or grow your market share by more effectively persuading the customer to buy from you.
- Reduce the time and effort necessary to sell by increasing the relationship level with the customer.
- Increase competitive ability and strength by reducing predictability and delivering concise, consistent competitive messages

**Financial Results:** A top functioning sales team delivers the following financial benefits to your company:

- Increased top line performance. A team that sells together can expand the size of each deal and sell more deals.
- Reduced selling expense. When a team does not perform well, sales cycles are extended and multiple calls are required to convince the customer of your solution superiority. When the team works well together, through both



planning and execution of the process, they'll shorten the sales cycle considerably.

- Lower recruiting and training costs. Teams that work well together have lower turnover, hence reducing the costs associated with recruiting, hiring and training new team members. There's also a reduction in the opportunity costs associated with a less than fully-functional team, although such opportunity costs are difficult to measure.
- Increased profitability. If you're able to sell more with fewer costs associated with the sales effort, your margin increases.

**Internal Results:** There are several benefits to the culture or internal operations aspect of the business derived from team training. They include:

- Easier adaptability to change. Team members that work well together will help each other adjust to and leverage change, either inside the organization or in the marketplace as a whole.
- Less "downtime". Dysfunctional teams spend a lot of time churning over issues, both internal and customer-centric. This churning not only results in employee turnover, but also slows down the entire sales process and can lead to less than cordial team interactions.
- Improved morale. When an individual feels like they've made a valuable contribution to the opportunity at hand, the team and the company, their morale remains high and they're less likely to be wooed away by your competition.

*"For people to treat each other as teammates, they have to believe it is in their best interest to cooperate; they must be more concerned with how the system as a whole operates than with optimizing their own little piece."*

Brian Joiner, author, Fourth Generation Management

### **Achieving Outstanding Results**

There are three actions that top performing organizations do in order to leverage team-based training to achieve these results.

First, if your organization uses competency maps or other documentation outlining the responsibilities associated with each role on the team, make sure that everyone on the team is made aware of everyone else's responsibilities. Charge and empower each team member to become accountable for their own responsibilities and to raise his or her hand when they need management's assistance in accomplishing their objectives.

Secondly, unless the skill being developed is without question focused solely on a specific team member (e.g. negotiation skills would be solely the account executive's responsibility) send the entire team to the training program, as a team. Be it opportunity management, presentation skills, developing the solution and value proposition, demonstration skills, etc. the entire team should attend, because every member on the team has some portion of making sure that step of the overall selling process occurs.

Thirdly, do not accept an individual's (or their manager's) assertion that they don't have time to attend training. No one is so highly skilled that they cannot benefit from some training. When it matters most (in the sales process) each will perform as well or as poorly as they trained for the event. When someone says they've forgotten more than they could learn during training, remind them that that might be the problem...they've forgotten it!



## Summary

There are many reasons that team-based training doesn't happen in organizations. Unfortunately, most of the reasons given for not training as teams are the exact reasons that team-based training should be implemented. People in sales (and sales management) are realizing that teamwork is far more important in today's world than that of the past. Cultural and economic realities as well as the globalization of the marketplace are increasing the pressure to perform. When individuals are forced to adapt to these changes by themselves, they get frustrated and become less productive. When they realize that they're doing it as part of a team, they achieve a synergy and increased productivity. As Lester Thurow stated, "it's the skills of your work force that will be the greatest competitive weapon. Make sure your sales team has every skill they need to succeed. If they sell as a team, they must train as a team."

*"If you train people properly, they won't be able to tell a drill from the real thing. If anything, the real thing will be easier."*

Richard Marcinko, CEO, SOS Temps, Inc.



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## **About InfoMentis**

InfoMentis is a global consulting and performance improvement company providing configurable programs that help our clients enable cultural change. We teach our clients how to more effectively get, keep and leverage their customers and help them achieve bottom-line results. Our configurable courseware, e-Learning modules, consulting services, and collaborative productivity tools are designed to be adapted for role-based behavioral change for those in marketing, sales, services, support and management around the entire customer lifecycle.

Headquartered in Alpharetta, Georgia, InfoMentis has helped industry leaders around the world understand and embrace the value of determining predictable revenue streams. Through our unique offerings, they are able to recognize that an opportunity for growth is significant among organizations eager to differentiate.

Founded in 1996, InfoMentis has provided performance improvement strategy, consulting and coaching to over 30,000 professionals, in 46 countries and six continents.

## **The Importance of Team-Based Training in Sales Organizations**

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