

# Branding Sales Culture

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**W**ith the advent of today's shopper-friendly culture, an abundance of fresh, shopper insights now sits on top of years of category expertise, consumer data, and brand facts. As a result, consumer packaged-goods companies have more to say to their retail customers than ever before.

Often, this conversation between brands and retailers is packaged into attractive presentations that are the centerpieces of customer meetings. However, there is much more to selling than reciting a deck, especially when store brands are challenging national brands as never before.

## Recapturing the value of selling skills is critical to building brand identity.

Reducing the sales team to "order takers and presenters" and ignoring basic and ongoing selling skills development can only add to the growing perception that national brands are undifferentiated and therefore expendable. Clearly, this is a mistake.

Every company has a critical message it needs to communicate to customers via its messengers — the sales team. This team is in constant change with a stream of new, untrained people joining the organization, along with talent from other companies

often recruited to fill key roles. This creates a broad spectrum of skill levels. The challenge is to build a team of sales people who understand the message and can deliver it consistently to generate results.

It's time to start branding the sales culture. Just like a product is branded to differentiate and identify, a sales organization should also have a branded and differentiated capability for selling.

At the core of branding a sales culture is ensuring the right skills are identified, developed, and valued. This means that new sales people must learn what is expected, and managers must know exactly how to coach. The point is to simplify expectations, clarify the process and align everyone to it. This ensures a consistent approach that is disciplined and more likely to lead to success.

Unfortunately, while shopper marketing has received considerable industry and media attention, relatively few organizations have even thought about branding their sales teams. In fact, in our own industry survey of sales executives, 69 percent said that their organization was the "same or *not* as good" as the sales teams of competitors. Fifty-four percent of survey respondents also admitted that their customers see the gaps in their selling skills.

This gap in selling skill is astonishing. Imagine a finance department without finance experts, or a marketing organization with average marketing skills. And yet industry leaders tell us the typical CPG sales organization lacks differentiating selling skills.

They are correct: In the CPG world today, selling skills are not what they use to be. They are taken for granted, and are no longer a competitive advantage for most CPG companies. This puts them at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to fulfilling the potential of shopper marketing to build their brands at retail.

Strategic	Foundational
→ Understanding buyer's objectives	→ Handling objectives
→ Business analysis	→ Negotiating
→ Long-term planning	→ Selling features and benefits
→ Applying category management principles	→ Building rapport
→ Understanding and using shopper insights	→ Listening
→ Analytical skills	→ Customer discovery process
→ Strategic thinking and planning	→ Presentation skills
	→ Presentation development
	→ Closing techniques

SOURCE: Meridan Consulting Group

### SALES SKILLS GAPS

To sell effectively, a CPG sales person needs two complementary skill sets — foundational and strategic (see above). Foundational skills include classic communication. We think of these as the “on-call” skills, used mainly while in front of the customer. Strategic skills include elements such as long-term planning and business analysis. These are the ‘pre-call’ skills mainly used to develop the selling story for the customer. Both are required for success.

We asked our survey respondents to rate the importance of 12 strategic and foundational skills in enabling a CPG sales person to do his or her job. Not surprisingly, all 12 skill areas were rated 4.0 or better on a five-point scale. However, when asked about expertise (the strength of most CPG sales people) in the same 12 areas, the average score was 2.97. It is safe to say that industry leaders see a significant gap in selling expertise.

Additionally, the skills rated as most important also were identified as having the largest gap in

expertise, indicating a more urgent need for action. For example, the skill given the highest importance rating by respondents was “understanding buyer’s objectives and strategies.” This, along with “strategic thinking and planning,” was identified as having the lowest level of expertise.

However, it was not just strategic skills that made the top of the list. Foundational selling skills such as negotiation and handling objections were also identified as critical skills — and skills with significant gaps.

The question is, why are we in this position? Ask most sales leaders and they will lament the intense pressure to deliver numbers that supercedes all other activities. The expectation for results has accelerated, and keeps sales teams looking for quick wins.

Developing any type of skill takes coaching and practice, and those are ideas that quickly take a back seat to “bringing in the numbers.” This perhaps explains why none of the survey respondents said that their company has a sales-training plan that is both

Top 5 Skill Areas	
1. Understanding buyer's objectives and strategies	Strategic
2. Strategic thinking and planning	Strategic
3. Negotiating skills	Foundational
4. Understanding and using shopper insights	Strategic
5. Customer discovery process	Foundational

SOURCE: Meridan Consulting Group

comprehensive and effective. Short-term wins again.

Another explanation for the lack of development is the reality that past efforts have had limited effectiveness. Training on selling skills is often done via periodic classroom-type events. While good learning often takes place, the content is often not reinforced, which dilutes the benefit.

Additionally, the training is typically not part of a comprehensive plan to build selling skills and is viewed by participants as an isolated event. The level of importance and the ongoing effort invested in a company's sales culture sends a negative message about the value of its people and their work. Ultimately, senior sales management owns the development of the sales team's skill level and must take responsibility for it.

Sales leaders also told us that skill coaching is not high quality, or is not taking place at all. Most organizations simply hope that people are learning on the job. But reality is different. According to survey respondents, coaching is only "average" when it takes place, and fewer than half are involved in a sales mentoring program. Those who should be coaching feel limited by other demands. They have no training curriculum or common expectations. In short, a "culture of selling" is not being developed.

#### CREATING THE CULTURE

The best CPG sales organizations have developed a clear "way of selling" that includes a specific set of skills and a process that enable their people to consistently deliver the selling story to customers. Their dedication to their "way of selling" defines a clear expectation of the value of sales and is supported with a comprehensive teaching effort.

This really isn't all that complicated. While selling in CPG has become more complex, requiring a broader range of selling skills to be successful, all of the requisite skills still fall into either the strategic or foundational category. Sales organizations can begin by establishing the two or three key selling skills from each category in which everyone in their sales organization should be an expert.

The key focus here is to bring clarity to specific skills that are required for success in the organization. Don't allow selling to be a broad, undefined concept. Selling is *the work*. It is much more than being likeable or having good ideas.

Identifying these focus areas allows the organization to build both strategic and foundational skills across all sales people. This helps onboard new recruits, improve the interface with the customer, and build capability to communicate with the customer in a way

that gets things done — a.k.a., selling!

Additionally, having a defined process for delivering the message ensures that sales people create the conditions to buy. A multi-step process that moves logically from a summary of the situation to gaining agreement to specific action works best. While it may appear rigid at first, the result of a disciplined selling process is always improved execution. The process should be customized for each organization and becomes a foundation of the selling culture.

Sustaining a "branded selling culture" means establishing a comprehensive curriculum that is delivered via multi-faceted training. Survey respondents want more than a few classroom-type learning experiences. While these are valuable, sales people need a curriculum that is customized for their specific roles and existing skill levels. Once started, this training must be reinforced through consistent coaching and mentoring activities.

A culture of selling means that leaders will be prepared to develop their people in "our way of selling." They should provide ongoing coaching that links to the company's "way of selling" — whether in preparation for customer engagements or for internal selling needed to gain alignment on key objectives.

Finally, to develop expertise, selling skills must be practiced. This is often overlooked because it takes time and can be uncomfortable, however, we certainly don't want to be practicing in front of customers.

Sales people should be put in situations where they can practice and get immediate feedback from peers or managers. By doing these things regularly, everyone will know that the skills which produce company revenue are highly valued.

Creating a "branded selling culture" must not be ignored. Sales leaders must be at the front of establishing this selling culture for it to truly take hold. Those organizations that begin the process may find themselves part of an elite group, differentiated from competitors in the capacity to sell, and winning at retail more consistently. Start the journey in your organization and reap the benefits of recapturing the value of selling skills. ■



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