

# IS YOUR SALES FORCE OBSOLETE?

**Your Company seems to have all the right stuff.  
So, why aren't you crushing your sales goals?**

*By Duane Sparks, Chairman, The Sales Board, Inc.*



## HOW TO TRAIN YOUR WAY OUT OF A SLUMP

This white paper is going to explain some things about the nature of learning and behavior, and why those things matter desperately to salespeople and the companies that employ them. To put the discussion in context, let's start with a true story.

Call it X Corp. You would recognize its real name. It is a highly respected, multi-billion-dollar company with more than 1,400 business-to-business salespeople worldwide.

On paper, X Corp is a model organization. It has ambitious but realistic goals for continuous growth. It has carefully laid plans to achieve those goals. It has a sophisticated reporting structure and appropriate management systems for a company of its size. It has an effective incentive-based compensation plan for salespeople and sales managers. It has a respected brand and a great marketing operation. Its salespeople thoroughly understand their industry and the technologies that they sell.

X Corp had all the right stuff...except for one thing. Sales began to slump. When we looked at their situation, we found they lacked a modern selling process that would foster continuous growth in the skills of their salespeople. We suspected those skill deficiencies were damaging sales and profits.

X Corp sent its sales reps to various training programs from time to time, and they picked up some useful techniques. But there was no systematic process--no unifying framework--that allowed the salespeople to adapt to changing conditions, build upon and refine their skills, and keep getting better at their jobs. They grew just so far, and then they hit a plateau--or slid slowly into obsolescence. Those who had been on the job for 15 years didn't really have 15 years of experience; they had the same year of experience 15 times.

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## SYMPTOMS OF THE PROBLEM?

Salespeople were in constant “react” mode when working with customers. When competitors offered lower prices, X Corp's salespeople saw no option except to match the cut-rate prices, thereby sacrificing margins. They spent their time dealing with trivial problems that kept them from selling new accounts and growing existing ones. They wandered from client to client with no productive objectives for their calls--no “Commitment Objectives” for client agreements that would move the sales process forward. They simply responded to whatever came up that day.

*Their routes had turned into ruts.*

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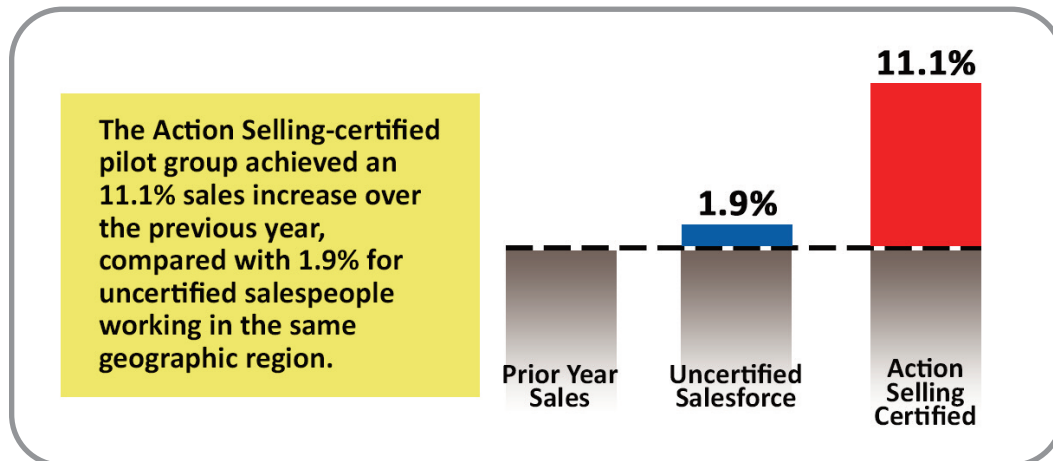
These were mostly experienced, veteran salespeople, but they were unproductive and stagnant. Management began to see them not as vital contributors but almost as a necessary evil. The marketing team couldn't understand why program after program failed to ignite the sales force and drive the ideas that marketing worked so hard to create and communicate. Indeed, due to the disconnect with sales, the marketing budget produced no tangible ROI at all.

Finally, X's Corporate University suggested that the answer might lie in a more coherent and sophisticated approach to the sales process. X Corp U investigated a number of sales training programs and selected The Sales Board's **Action Selling Certification™** system. One appealing feature was that Action Selling offered excellent curriculum but also sales certification. This means that salespeople don't just receive information but must demonstrate mastery of the skills by transferring them into the field and producing results.

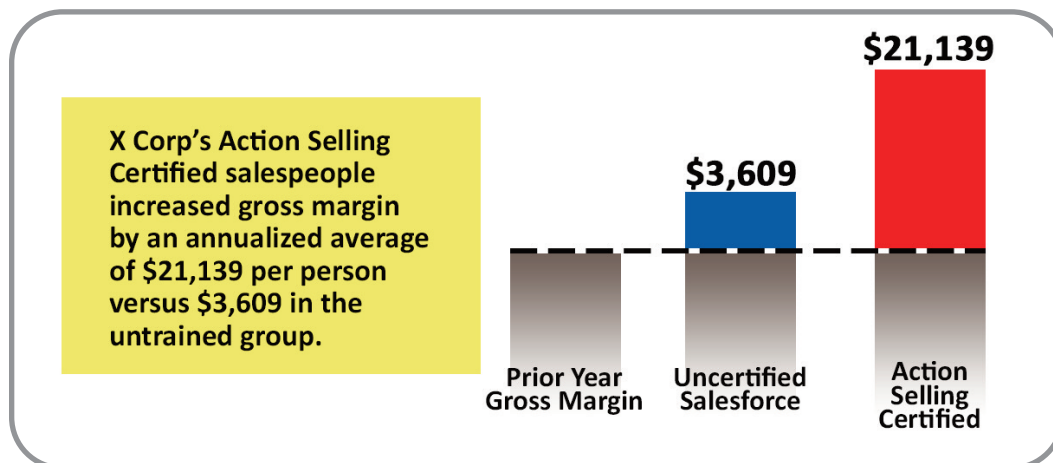
***Their routes had turned into ruts.***

X Corp trained and certified a pilot group (a regional vice president, five field managers and 50 salespeople) in the *Action Selling* system. It then took unusual pains to track the results by comparing year-to-year performance of the certified pilot group with untrained members of the sales force in the same region. Here are some of those results:

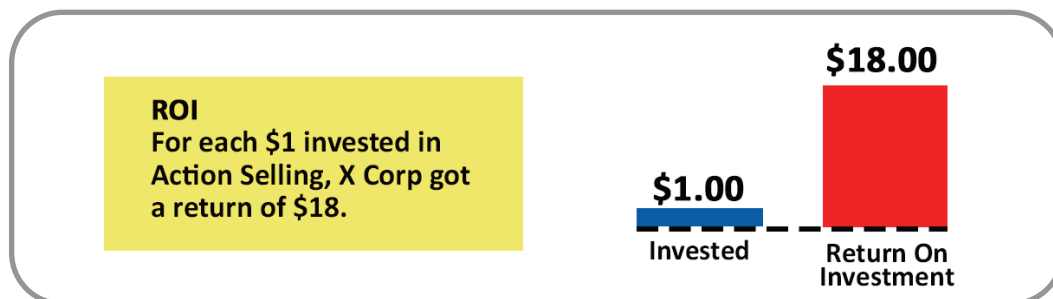
## REVENUE GREW 6X MORE WITH ACTION SELLING TRAINING



## GROSS MARGIN INCREASED 6X MORE PER SALESPERSON



## ROI WAS OFF THE CHARTS



No other investment opportunity available to X Corp comes close to promising that kind of ROI--no acquisition, no marketing initiative, no strategic partnership, nothing. Needless to say, X Corp launched the **Action Selling Certification** system globally.



## WHAT MAKES RESULTS LIKE THAT POSSIBLE?

Obviously, **Action Selling** must be a powerful and effective selling system. But there is more to it than that. X Corp's certified sales reps could not have achieved those stellar numbers just because they were “taught” to plan and manage client calls differently. Before anything really valuable could happen, they had to translate their learned skills and knowledge into everyday behavior on the job. They had to *use* the skills and *apply* the knowledge.

These principles are universal. They have been validated by many years of research in academia and the corporate world. They apply to all kinds of job skills, though we will look at them through the lens of sales.

## DOES YOUR ENVIRONMENT INHIBIT LEARNING?

We have all noticed that some salespeople cease to grow because they cease to learn. But studies show that seven key factors in the training environment and the job environment determine whether learning actually will produce significant personal growth. Here is how one creates an effective learning environment and helps ensure that the learned skills will really be used on the job.

1. **Train the managers, not just the salespeople. Sales managers will either reinforce or hinder behavior changes. It is folly to teach salespeople to do things a certain way and then send them back to work for managers who don't understand, support, and reinforce the new system.**
2. **Foster experimentation and creativity in the training. When salespeople have fun, they learn fast and well. And they're more likely to translate the learning into lasting behavior changes.**
3. **Treat salespeople as peers. Honor and respect their opinions. A manager can learn as much from students as students learn from the manager.**
4. **Use self-directed learning, where salespeople take responsibility for their own learning and have all needed resources available to them.**
5. **Measure their pre-training skill level. Salespeople should be challenged just beyond their present level of ability. To do that, you have to know what their ability level is.**
6. **Create active involvement in the learning through interaction, exercises, roleplays and games. Encourage experienced salespeople to share their knowledge with less experienced ones.**
7. **Include regular feedback mechanisms that tell management what has been learned and what is yet to be learned. Just-in-Time manager coaching, assessments, manager observations/feedback, and a certification process are examples.**

**In study after study, learning environments that include more examples of those seven factors have been found most effective at creating lasting changes in behavior.**

## **WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT TRAINING EXPERIENCED SALESPeOPLE**

Four critical elements come to bear in training for experienced salespeople:

### **1. Motivation**

**Without motivation, there can be no learning at all.** If the salesperson does not recognize a need or benefit for change, the training effort will be in vain. “What’s in it for me if I learn to do things this way?” is a question that must be addressed early in the process.

**What gets measured gets learned.** When salespeople know that their learning will be assessed (i.e., they’ll be tested), their motivation to learn increases. The same applies to assessing their behavior back on the job when the learning program is over. A formal certification process thus boosts motivation to learn new skills, to practice them, and to use them on the job.

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### **2. Reinforcement**

When training salespeople, instructors are attempting to change old behaviors. Psychologists agree that this is hard for adults to do even if they are aware of a need for change. And in most cases, *salespeople are not aware of the self-defeating habits they need to change.*

Reinforcing behavior change starts in the classroom by creating awareness of why certain behaviors need to change. Follow-up reinforcement after training helps prevent relapses into old behavior, especially when that follow-up comes from the salesperson’s manager. When the boss clearly expects that the new behavior will be used on the job and holds the salesperson accountable for this, learning is far more likely to transfer into practice.

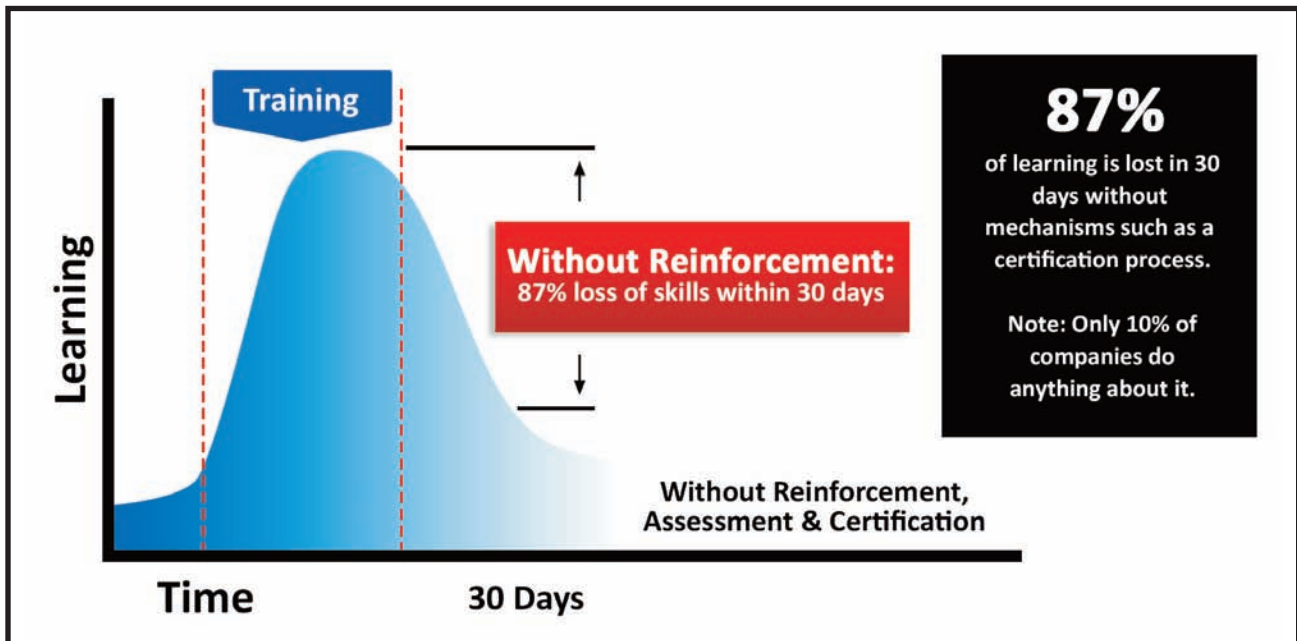
***In most cases, salespeople are not aware of the self-defeating habits they need to change.***

### 3. Retention

The whole point of sales training--or any job-related training--is to create behavior change, not just learning for its own sake. Yet studies show that *only 10% of organizations evaluate training's effectiveness on that basis*. Most often, the only thing measured is salespeople's immediate reactions to a training program. So-called "smile sheets" are passed out after class, essentially just asking, "How did you like it?"

There is nothing wrong with measuring initial learner satisfaction. But smile-sheet evaluations tell you nothing about how much the salespeople actually learned, never mind whether they will apply new skills and knowledge on the job. Research shows that regardless of positive smile-sheet findings, trained groups often perform no differently from untrained groups when they return to the job.

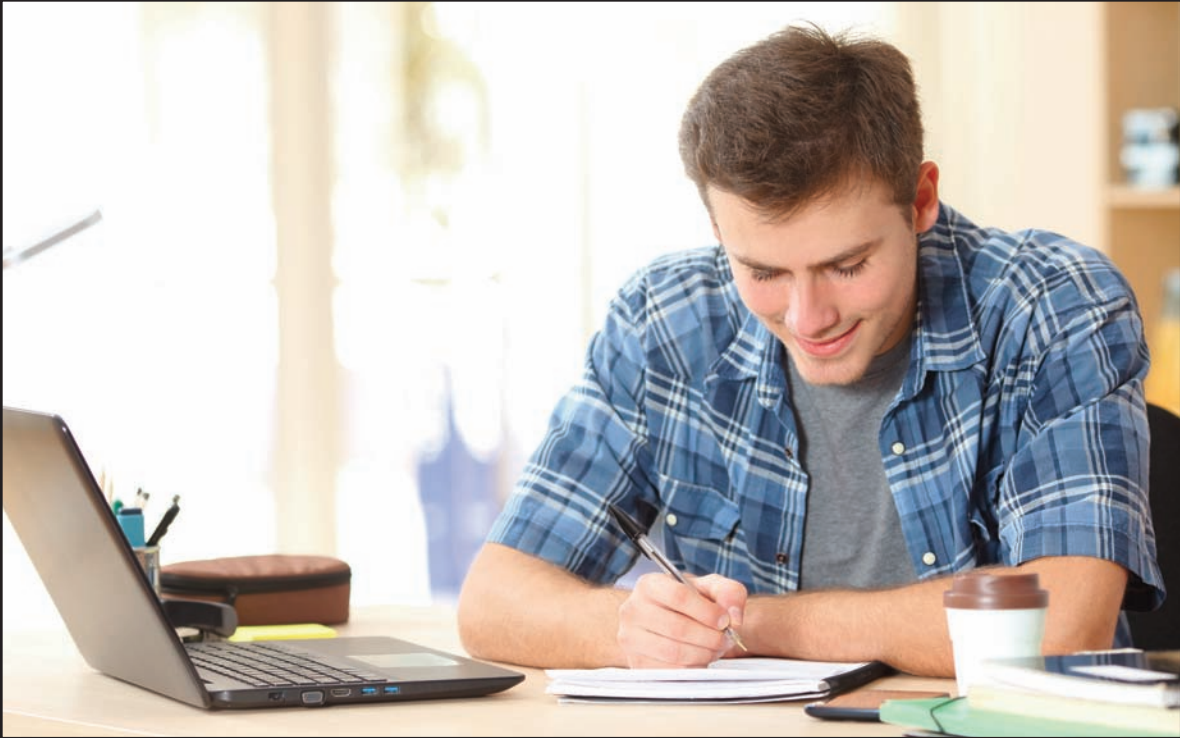
**87% of learning is forgotten in only 30 days unless some mechanisms are in place to measure and reinforce it.**



Studies also demonstrate that *87% of learning is forgotten in only 30 days unless some mechanisms are in place to measure and reinforce it*. Most companies conduct no follow-up with salespeople after a training program. Most training programs don't ask them to.

## 4. Transference

Transference is the salesperson's ability to use the information that was taught in work-related activities. Obviously, this is the principal goal of training salespeople.



### Three elements are critical to transference:

- 1) Salespeople must be actively involved in the learning process and *they must have expectations of follow-up activities and assessment.* (“Yes, there will be a test.”)
- 2) Salespeople must know that their *managers will require them to demonstrate their new skills* in the field. (“You don't just have to learn this, you'll have to do it.”)
- 3) Salespeople need to connect learning to their life experiences in a logical framework. Learning is easiest when it builds on a foundation of knowledge we already have. And it is essential that salespeople begin to *practice new skills in the work environment immediately.*

Management support and reinforcement back on the job, after the training, is critical for new skills to transfer to the work environment.



## IF YOUR SALES TRAINING DOESN'T INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING, DON'T DO IT!

What's needed is a complete, on-going, systematic process to help salespeople learn new skills, apply them to their selling situations, and measure the results the company achieves because the salespeople are behaving differently.



For instance, **Action Selling** uses the process outlined above. In each phase, a variety of tools are used, based on the principles we have discussed, to maximize both learning and transfer. Each salesperson's skills are measured three times: once before training, again 91 days following initial training, and finally at the time of certification (150 days). These time frames allow for sufficient feedback, on-the-job practice, and additional learning opportunities for each student to master the skills that lead to the achievement of your company's training objectives.



**BENCHMARK ➡ SKILLS ASSESSMENT ➡ FINAL CERTIFICATION**

Students must be tracked and measured as they advance towards mastery of the skills you'll be teaching. Measuring learning not only motivates students to learn well, it tells you where any learning gaps exist. To fill gaps, the Action Selling skills assessments will prescribe additional exercises to achieve competency in each of five critical selling skills.



Once these skills are learned and salespeople have transferred the skills into the field, they will become Action Selling Certified. Studies show that

Take a lesson from X Corp. Don't just send salespeople off to training programs from time to time and hope that something sticks. If you want to pull them out of their ruts, start with a sales system that you believe can deliver the results you desire: one that teaches the right skills and provides the right framework in which to apply them. Then don't just train...train and Certify.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Duane Sparks is chairman and founder of The Sales Board, a Minneapolis-based strategic sales training company that has trained and certified more than 400,000 salespeople in more than 3,500 groups in the system and skills of Action Selling™. Sparks has guided companies through every phase of business development, from start-up, turnaround, survival and rapid growth. He has also written five sales books, personally facilitated more than 300 Action Selling training sessions and continues to engage in the business and art of the strategic sales process.

Duane Sparks is the author of Five **Sales Books**:



**Action Selling:** *How To Sell Like A Professional, Even If You Think You Are One*

**Selling Your Price:** *How To Escape The Race To The Bargain Basement*

**Questions:** *The Answer To Sales*

**Masters of Loyalty:** *How To Turn Your Work Force Into A Loyalty Force*

**Sales Strategy From The Inside Out:** *How Complex Selling Really Works*

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