

Evaluating Sales Training in the 21st Century



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EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of any training program is to change attitudes, behaviors or skills in a way that positively impacts business results.

Evaluating both the effectiveness and value of a sales training program in order to understand whether it meets its terminal objectives is critical so that you can measure the program's contribution to the bottom line of the organization's business. In these days of corporate re-engineering and continual downsizing, training budgets are being held under intense scrutiny. By demonstrating that sales training produces positive, tangible results, you'll be in a position not only to justify your organization's expenditures for training but also to substantiate the program's value in terms of lasting process improvement.

Systematic evaluation of sales training programs is also an important step in continually improving the overall quality of the training program. What is the appropriate level of evaluation to measure and analyze results of sales training programs? To some degree, the answer to this question is dependent on the evaluation constituency. Line managers typically have a greater interest in performance change and business results than in participant reaction and learning. On the other hand, a training organization might have a greater interest in collecting reaction and learning data to determine the components of the training program that could be improved.

FOUR LEVELS OF EVALUATION

One of the leading approaches to evaluating the quality of training programs takes both constituencies in consideration. Developed by Donald Kirkpatrick, Consultant and Professor at the University of Wisconsin, it consists of a four-level model to gauge the effectiveness of a training program, as shown in the chart that immediately follows.

Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Training Evaluation

LEVEL	TYPE	ADDRESSES THE QUESTION	INDICATORS
1	Reaction	Did they like the training?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant feedback/surveys
2	Learning	Did they learn anything?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exercises Case studies Pre-test/post-test instruments
3	Behavior	Are they using it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surveys & interviews with participants & participants' managers (back in field)
4	Business Results	Is it working and yielding value for the organization?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant feedback/surveys

Level 1: Reaction

Reaction is a measure of the learners' level of satisfaction with the training program. It addresses the question: Did the participants like the training?

Participants complete survey forms, generally at the end of the program, offering their reactions to the training initiative. They might be asked how well they liked the instructor's presentation techniques, how completely the topics were covered, how valuable they perceived each module of the program or the relevance of the program content to their specific job. They could also be asked how they planned to use the new concepts or models that were presented. As a result, Level 1 evaluation can be useful in identifying areas within the training program that need to be enhanced, eliminated or changed.

Salespeople are keenly aware of the problems they encounter during a sales campaign and expect a sales training program to provide solutions to those problems. If the program misses the mark, a determination should be made whether it's the fault of the program design, delivery or combination of both. Because reaction information doesn't measure what participants have learned or whether what they have learned can be transferred to their jobs, it doesn't provide an indicator of the program's return on investment. This shortcoming has caused some evaluators to downplay its value. However, the interest, attention and motivation of the participants are elements that are critical to the success of any training program. Employees learn better when they accept training willingly and react positively to the style, delivery and content of the program.

Used alone, Level 1 evaluations do not tell us much about the overall effectiveness of the program. Someone who reacts favorably may not

have acquired the knowledge or skills that were part of the program's overall objectives. More information is required to demonstrate results and validate the effectiveness of the training program.

Level 2: Learning

Learning measures whether the training program changed the attitudes, increased the knowledge or improved the skills of the participant. It addresses the question: Did the participants learn anything? Measuring the learning that takes place in a training program is important because no change in behavior can be expected unless the learning objectives of the program are accomplished. Evaluating the learning that has taken place is typically focused on determining the following

- What knowledge was acquired?
- What skills were acquired, developed or enhanced?
- What attitudes were changed?

Level 2 measurements can be implemented during the training program, using a variety of evaluation techniques. Measurements at this level might indicate that a program's instructional methods are effective or that learning did take place, but does not show whether—or how—the new learning will be applied in the field.

Level 3: Behavior

Behavior measures the participants' application of the learning on the job—or what happens when the participants leave the classroom and return to their work environment. It addresses the question: Are the participants using what they learned? It is important to measure behavior because the primary purpose of sales training is to improve business results by changing behavior. New learning is meaningless to an organization unless the participants actually use these new skills, attitudes or knowledge in their daily work activities.

Since these measurements must take place after the participants have returned to their jobs, the actual implementation of Level 3 measurements will typically involve the participants' manager, other staff management personnel or even client personnel who are in a position to observe changes in behavior. Although it takes significantly more effort to collect this data than it does to collect Level 1 and 2 data during the training program, its value is of vital importance to the organization. Level 3 data

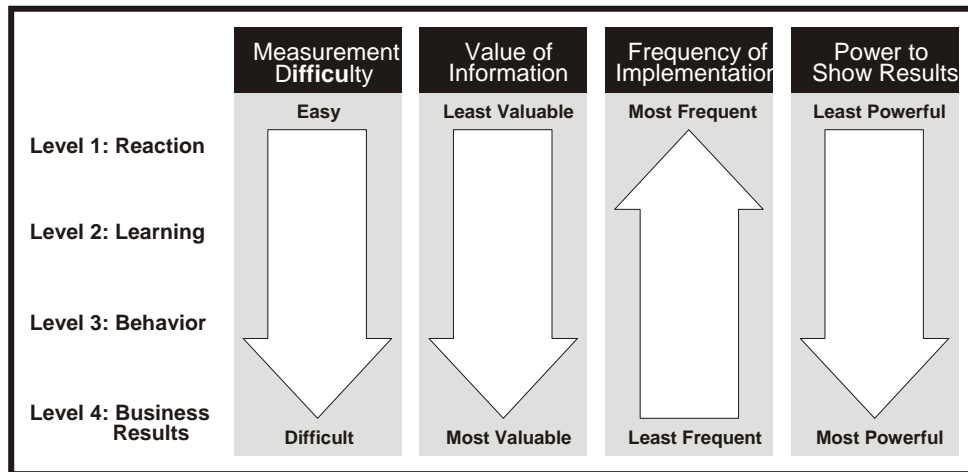
can also provide insight into the transfer of learning to the participant's work environment or the barriers encountered in attempting to implement the new techniques or processes learned in the program.

Level 4: Business Results

Business results measure the impact the training program has had on the organization. It addresses the key question: Is it working and delivering value to the organization? These results can include increased sales, sales with increased levels of profit, decreased time to close, lower costs of sales and higher close rates. Here we expand our thinking beyond the impact on the salespeople who participated in the training program and begin to ask what happens to the organization as a result of our training efforts.

While it is difficult to isolate the specific business results of a training program, it is usually possible and feasible to link certain training contributions to organizational improvements. Collecting, organizing and analyzing Level 4 information is more difficult, time-consuming and more costly than the other three levels. The payoff, however, is worthwhile when viewed in context of its value to the organization, as shown in the chart that immediately follows.

Use of the Four Levels of Evaluation – A Comparison



As the chart above indicates, as you progress down through the four levels, the evaluation process becomes increasingly more difficult and time-consuming. At the same time, it also provides information that is of progressively more value to the organization.

As expected, the most frequently used measurement is Level 1 because it is the easiest to obtain and analyze. However, it provides the least

valuable information to the organization. Measuring business results is considerably more difficult and is conducted significantly less frequently, yet yields the most valuable information - whether or not the organization is receiving a return on its training investment.

It may be tempting to avoid measuring the lower levels (of Kirkpatrick's model) and go directly to the higher levels of evaluation. However, each level provides us with a unique set of data and measuring all four levels is critical to effectively evaluating a sales training program.

For example, if we were to only measure behavior (Level 3) and found no change in behavior took place, we might jump to the conclusion that the training program was ineffective and no learning took place. However, if we also measure Levels 1 and 2 and find that the reactions of the participants were positive and, in fact, that some learning actually took place as a result of the training program, the lack of behavioral change may be due to other factors. These might include a lack of support from management or changes in the participant's job environment, including new responsibilities or even a totally new assignment.

In addition, a lack of reinforcement of the concepts and skills taught in the training program can have a significant impact on the participant's ability to apply those concepts and skills in the work environment.

Management reinforcement and support of the techniques and processes delivered in the training program are critical to not only the program's success, but to the infusion of these techniques and processes within the sales organization. Having managers attend the sales training program with their salespeople, reinforcing the program during and after the event and subsequently learning about the best practices of implementation in management programs with their peers, will often yield significantly better results. In addition, as you will see later, the interaction using terminology learned in the program between managers and their salespeople back on the job, can be an effective barometer of the program's value.

APPROACHES TO EVALUATION

Although evaluation of training programs is important, very few training providers conduct a comprehensive evaluation process that measures a wide range of training objectives. By implementing a rigorous process, you can measure the value of sales training programs at all four levels of evaluation. Consideration should also be given during the program design process to the evaluation methodology and levels that will ultimately be implemented.

EVALUATING REACTION

As we have seen, evaluating reaction is the easiest measurement to implement. While many trainers call these evaluation forms “smile sheets,” this data can be useful if analyzed effectively and compared to benchmarks and standards. One approach is to capture this data at the end of each training program and use scanning technology to analyze the information immediately following each program. Comparing individual program results to company benchmarks can then yield useful data for your company, the individual sales training instructors and your clients.

Reaction reports can then be produced for internal use as well as to provide feedback to clients. Internally, these measurements only serve as one indicator of program quality. Participants’ reactions to the instructor provide one indication of instructor quality when compared to the instructor’s prior program average and the world-wide average for the same program. By carefully analyzing and tracking the reaction data, your company can ensure that the quality of each of its sales training programs is consistently at a high level.

These reports can then be distributed to each instructor for their use in improving the quality of their individual instruction. Instructors can compare their delivery of a recent program to their “running” average and the world-wide average. Specific areas of improvement can be noted and suggested.

You can also develop an overview of the program evaluation results, together with the written comments of the participants, and provide that information to clients in a variety of useful formats. In his text, *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels*, Kirkpatrick suggests that the comparison of reaction data against benchmark standards and the communication of this information are the two vital steps necessary to successfully use this type of evaluation information.

EVALUATING LEARNING

The acquisition of new skills and knowledge, or a change in attitude, must take place before a training program can have a positive impact on an organization. Examples of three different tools that could be used to ensure that each participant understands and can apply the new skills taught in sales training programs are as follows: (1) program activities, using the “live” current sales opportunities of each participant, (2) a realistic case study, and (3) a structured methodology to understand, test and improve the sales campaign for each sales opportunity.

One approach to the design and delivery of sales training is to have each participant bring a “live” sales opportunity to the program. This opportunity forms the basis for program activities and yields an immediate analysis of the application of learning. Throughout the program, the instructor guides the participants toward an understanding of the material by effectively applying the new concepts, processes and methodologies to their sales opportunities.

A second indicator of learning uses a robust and realistic case study that tests the participants’ ability to identify and implement (for example) an effective sales strategy in a sales campaign. The case study is used to determine whether the participants understand the material delivered and can apply it effectively.

A third measure is a structured methodology to understand, test and improve each sales campaign. This process allows participants to present their live sales opportunity to the rest of the class. The other participants help test that sales opportunity and improve it by applying the knowledge and skills learned in the sales training program. The result is a fully tested and improved plan, ready for implementation in a “live” sales campaign.

An additional way to measure learning is the implementation of pre-test and post-test instruments. For those organizations whose culture supports the use of this approach, standard pre-test/post-test instruments can be developed, using straightforward approaches.

EVALUATING BEHAVIOR

Unlike the first two levels of measurement, where the evaluation is done during or immediately following the sales training program, changes in behavior take time and opportunity for the participants to apply.

Consider surveying program participants four to six months after the completion of the training program to measure behavior. The survey questions can then be expanded to include both Level 3 and 4 and questions such as:

- Are you consistently using this process in the sales campaign?
- Has the process provided value for you?
- Is your manager using and supporting the process?
- How did the process help you compete more effectively?
- What are you doing differently as a result of the training program?

- What business results did you achieve, using the new process (in terms of specific sales opportunities closed, including revenue impact)?

Anecdotal data can often then be immediately connected to the training program itself. Comments like: *“By implementing this process, my client now views me as a consultant. I believe this delivers the message to our clients that I am concerned about the specific business value I bring to their organization”* and *“I am now analyzing each sales opportunity in a more focused manner. The ability for me to communicate with my sales team and sales manager using the same terminology and in a consistent manner is truly invaluable”* demonstrate that the training program successfully modified the salesperson’s behavior.

Level 3 data also provides insight into the participant’s acceptance of the new techniques delivered in the sales training program, their progress in implementing the new concepts in the field and their perception of their manager’s reinforcement of the new techniques.

Sales managers can then use this data to assess whether their salespeople are utilizing the new techniques and compare it to benchmarks they established for field implementation. They can also examine the data to try to identify the barriers to process implementation, which might not be obvious to them.

Sales executives within the client organization also receive insight into the roles their sales managers play in reinforcing the process and supporting its implementation in the field. They can also compare this data to their own benchmarks for implementation success.

Level 3 data could indicate to the sales executive that additional post-program activities may be required to reinforce the sales training event and support the implementation of new processes and techniques in the field. These post-program activities might include front line management training, targeted review programs for all field personnel or other activities aimed at eliminating the barriers to field implementation.

To illustrate how Level 3 results could be tested and reinforced, consider the following. In one sales training program, the concept of the client’s compelling reason to act (CRA) is introduced as a key factor for a salesperson to analyze throughout a sales campaign. A CRA is an event that motivates the client to implement a new application or solution—the client will receive a benefit or payback if results are achieved by a certain date and/or experience some consequences if the decision is delayed.

The common terminology around this one concept - CRA - helps open the door to effective communication between the salesperson and sales manager, leading to an understanding of whether the salesperson is effectively using the key principles of the training program in the field. By asking the salesperson to describe the client's CRA, the sales manager also gains additional insight about the salesperson's ability to deductively apply what they learned in the training program.

Not only does use of a common terminology help measure Level 3 results, it is also an indicator of positive Level 3 outcomes. Encouraging the salesperson and the sales manager to come together to discuss sales campaigns using common terminology is an excellent way to promote continual behavioral change and reinforce the concepts delivered in the sales training program.

EVALUATING BUSINESS RESULTS

This level of evaluation is the most difficult to measure and therefore often avoided by most companies. When implemented correctly, however, this measurement offers the most relevant information regarding the value of the training program, specifically in terms of return on the training investment to the organization.

Level 4 data (business results) can be captured in the same survey questionnaire used to secure Level 3 information. Participants can be asked to report the results or status of the "live" sales opportunity they brought to the sales training program. In addition, they can be asked to report on any other sales opportunities in which they applied the new methodology learned in the training program.

The questions used to ascertain Level 4 data need to be very specific, so that the business results can be clearly linked to the sales training program. For example, asking the participants "What sales opportunities were closed as a result of applying the new methodology or process?" can provide the evaluator with an indication that the business results could be linked to the training program. However, probing further and asking the participant to "identify the specific contribution the new methodology provided to win the deal" yields even greater linkage to the training program. Only by asking both questions can the evaluator begin to attempt to measure the return on investment derived from the training interventions.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

Evaluating sales training programs is an on-going requirement that is being made easier with today's emerging technologies. For example, collecting participant demographic information at the time Level 1 evaluations are completed and storing that information in a participant data base facilitates the processing and collecting of data at Levels 2 through 4.

Using the Internet, Level 2 post-tests can be accessed and completed by the participants, using a password-protected approach. Participants are given access to a web page and, using their password, get access to post-tests that are randomly generated for each participant. Random-generated testing programs are generally available for use today.

Completion of Level 3-4 questionnaires can be accomplished in a similar fashion, again using the same participant data base. Four to six months after participating in a sales training program, participants are given a distinct password and asked to complete an on-line survey that contains questions related to their behavior on the job (Level 3) and the business results they have achieved (Level 4). Behaviors can be summarized and return on investment calculated from these surveys.

Evaluating the results of training at all four levels is a significant challenge to training professionals, yet the need for effective evaluation is critical in these days of budget scrutiny and corporate streamlining. All training providers should have a well-established methodology for evaluating sales training programs. Taken together, these indicators of evaluation form the basis of lasting change within the sales organization.

Summary of Approaches Used at Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Evaluation

LEVEL	TYPE	TYPICAL APPROACHES
1	Reaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End of program feedback from each participant • Benchmark comparisons of individual program results to world-wide (or company-wide) averages to ensure quality delivery of each program
2	Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercises using "live" sales opportunities • Application of a realistic case study • Participation in a structured process to test and improve the sales campaign of each participant
3	Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys that address the use of the new sales process in the field • Focus Groups • Anecdotal feedback that can be validated
4	Business Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys that address increased sales, specific business results or increased close rates

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Dr. Steve Bistriz brings more than three decades of high-technology sales, sales management and training management experience in helping companies ranging from start-ups to established global leaders. He has broad experience in designing and delivering sales training programs and in implementing creative approaches to their measurement and evaluation. Steve is a published author and lecturer in the field of sales, sales management and selling at the executive level.

Steve spent more than 27 years with IBM in a number of sales and training-related positions. He then joined a sales training company in Atlanta where he led that company's development of sales training programs which were delivered to tens of thousands of professional salespeople around the globe. He holds a doctorate in human resource development from Vanderbilt University, which he received in 1995. He is currently president of his own consulting firm based in Atlanta and you can visit his website at www.sellxl.com.