Reinventing the Wheel

BY BRIAN WASHBURN AND RANDY HARRIS

An automotive retailer uses tire sales training to change attitudes and build confidence.

Before we begin our story, let's consider an old teaching joke:

Once upon a time, a teacher asked her student, "If I gave you two cats and two more cats and two more cats, how many cats would you have?"

"Seven," replied the student.

Puzzled, the teacher repeated the word problem and, once again, the student responded, "Seven."

The teacher paused for a moment, then switched up the problem. "If I gave you two apples, then two more apples, and two more apples after that, how many would you have?" she asked.

"Six," replied the student.

"Ah, I'm getting somewhere now!" thought the teacher. So, she returned to the original problem but again the student replied, "Seven."

Exasperated, the teacher asked, "Why in the world do you keep saying seven?"



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Express Oil & Tire Engineers

Industry:
Automotive services and products

HQ Location:
Birmingham, Alabama

Footprint:
More than 300 locations across 15 U.S. states

Founded:
1979

The student replied, "Because I already have one cat at home."

This example demonstrates how sometimes facilitators fail to recognize what their learners already have before they start teaching. Such was the case when we began thinking through a training strategy to help employees at Express Oil & Tire Engineers add product sales to their skill set.

Opportunity

Express Oil & Tire Engineers is a regional chain that offers full-service automotive mechanical care. It's known for having automotive experts that complete their services quickly and accurately.

Through a series of acquisitions, the company added a complementary service—tire sales—to its offerings in 2017. Its employees had always been passionate and knowledgeable about the services they provided, but the organization's culture of commitment to excellence didn't lead to immediate results when it came to selling tires.

For many sales representatives, selling highly technical products went beyond both their knowledge base and their comfort zone. They did not feel confident recommending products from a variety of tire manufacturers, and some feared they would turn off long-time customers if they moved from talking about core services to trying to engage customers with a pitch for tire sales.

Despite the early struggles, the executive leadership was committed to the company's growth strategy through product sales in addition to its traditional automotive services. To increase revenue, the organization decided to launch a learning and certification program that would alleviate its sales representatives' concerns and help them build confidence when selling products.

Solution

Executive leadership made clear that any talent development initiative supporting the sales team would need to be succinct. With their own stores to run, sales staff would not be able to take a long leave of absence to attend a training program. The result was an in-person sales training program limited to one day.

During a planning meeting, executive leadership and a group of trainers together outlined challenges and brainstormed potential solutions. It quickly became apparent that any talent development initiative would not be successful unless:

- Specific point people were identified at every store location to specialize in product knowledge.
- The training component went beyond surface-level technical content and building sales skills to actively address skepticism and build confidence.
- Executive leadership verbally and visibly demonstrated its support of the initiative.

Process

Before launching the program, the talent development team asked store leaders to help choose the right employees to participate. Vice presidents and directors of operations at every store identified the best communicators at their locations and sent them to specialize in product knowledge.

Recognizing that the employees identified as product sales specialists already had sales skills (they had one cat at home, so to speak), the talent development team asked them to

Stores have experienced a double-digit increase in product sales.

complete a series of 17 online learning modules during the month prior to the in-person session.

Each of these 10-minute online modules focused on specific product information. With participants completing the courses ahead of time, the trainers could then spend more time during the in-person training session addressing attitudes, concerns, and questions about product sales instead of using that valuable time to cover basic product information.

To underscore the importance of the training goals, the executive leadership informed participants that they would not be allowed to enter the classroom for the in-person component without having completed the online modules. Prior to the in-person session, the talent development team sent progress reports to participants and their managers so that there would be no surprises as to who would (and wouldn't) be allowed to attend.

The organization chose to hold the in-person training sessions at regional locations—some at corporate headquarters and others at hotel facilities—to ensure participants wouldn't need to travel far. From the moment learners walked through the doors of these sessions, they were treated as salespeople, not as product experts. Every activity was designed to provide participants the opportunity to practice their sales skills and reflect on what they already knew and were capable of doing.

To add a certain level of engagement and levity to the program, participants completed a series of "Tire Olympic" challenges and competitions as a method to review product knowledge from the online modules. Once participants' existing skills in identifying customer needs were married to their deeper knowledge of the products, they

Let's Go to the Videotape

Using role play in a sales training program is not a new concept, but that doesn't mean it can't be done in new ways. During Express Oil & Tire Engineers' sales training program, we asked participants to simulate sales conversations while their peers video-recorded the exercise using whatever smartphone or tablet they had brought with them.

While some participants raised an eyebrow at the idea of being videotaped (who likes to hear their own voice, let alone see themselves on video?), this proved to be one of the most powerful aspects of the training initiative. Just as professional athletes review game film to identify where and how to improve for the next time, we applied video to help sales representatives see their body language and hear their words in action.

After the simulated sales conversation but before any feedback was given, we asked participants to review the videos of themselves and complete an evaluation form to identify strengths and areas for improvement.

Without video, it's easy for participants to refute feedback they may receive following a role play. However, the video camera removed much of the subjectivity that is normally associated with role-play feedback.

were given a variety of opportunities to simulate real-life sales scenarios in a practice environment and receive detailed feedback about their performance.

Getting certified entailed participants demonstrating their ability to embrace and apply product sales skills when they returned to their home stores. Participants returned home with specific performance metrics set for the first month after the training session with the understanding that they wouldn't become certified without achieving those metrics.

In a show of support, the executives attending this training program also were assigned specific sales goals to complete at a store.

Outcomes

Executives were cautiously optimistic that the initiative would be deemed a success after its first pilot run. One trainer reported, "I have had more than 10 attendees reach out to me personally to thank me for everything we covered in the class. I don't think we could have done a better job of packing all of that information into a one-day class and having it not be overwhelming."

Level 1 participant feedback is a nice indicator, but executives were eager for higher-level results around sales representatives' productivity and attitudes.

Following another initial one-day session, a regional account manager shared another story about the changes in attitudes among sales representatives: "We have a manager at one of the larger stores that is a huge advocate for a competing brand. Our company even has a plant in her store's town, yet she always tries to sell their employees on this competitor. This has been an ongoing issue over the last six months or so," he explained, adding: "I got a text from her the day after she attended our class. She said there was a customer waiting for the competitor's product to be delivered, but she upsold them to our brand instead. It is little wins like this that will add up across the stores in the long run."

When it comes to financial return on the investment of this training program, data came in the form of both individual successes as well as company-wide metrics.

After attending the in-person session, one manager was so motivated to take his knowledge and skills back to his store that he only needed four days to realize a 67 percent increase over his average weekly sales. Nine months into this initiative, representatives from about one-third of Express Oil & Tire Engineers' 300 locations have completed the training, and those stores have experienced a double-digit increase in product sales. The feedback from participants regarding the quality and effectiveness of the training is, on average, a 9.2 on a 10-point scale.

Altogether, this initiative shows that when talent development combines executive buy-in and content knowledge with the existing knowledge and skills base of learners, then two plus two plus two can equal more than six.

Brian Washburn is the co-founder and lead instructional designer for Endurance Learning; brian@endurancelearning.com.

Randy Harris is the vice president for training, development, and compliance at Express Oil & Tire Engineers; rharris@expressoil.com.





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