

# Making the sales profession more professional

Sales is not just an integral part of business. It is business.

Practically nothing happens without sales, and this is true of every sector and every business, public or private. You could be selling a product. You could be selling a service. Or you could be selling an ideal. But it all boils down to creating or identifying a need, and providing something to fill that need. And, of course, being paid for doing just that.

Given its all-encompassing importance to the business world, there is a surprising lack of understanding regarding sales. Often, phrases such as "natural salesperson" are bandied about, completely missing the point that sales is a profession – and one which people can become highly qualified in. A golfer (variously described as Gary Player, Arnold Palmer or even Ben Hogan) once faced the same lack of understanding when asked about whether or not he was lucky. "It's a funny thing," he replied. "The more I practice, the luckier I get."

The fact that popular culture is

rid-  
dled with salespeople in the mould of Del Boy or Arthur Daly has done nothing to help the notion that sales training is essential for both individuals involved in selling and for companies. The reality on the ground is that, while some people may be more naturally gifted at selling than others, without proper training, even the best salespeople will find their potentials unfulfilled.

"Training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) are very important for salespeople," said Sandy Metcalfe, director of Business and Training Solutions, an education partner with the Sales Institute of Ireland (BTS actually helped to develop a number of the Institutes educational programmes). "And it is encouraging to see so many bright young people, many with qualifications up to Masters level, enrolling in our courses. It points to a recognition of sales as a particular skill and profession, rather than the traditional image of a career in sales. Indeed, one of the things that we do in training is to get people to deal with the historic image of sales, and help them to realise that it is just that - history."



Charlie Mernagh, associate Director of BTS and Sandy Metcalfe, Director of BTS

The training offered by BTS is comprehensive and has a proven track record – and is especially strong in areas such as identifying the sorts of interventions needed to engender positive changes in the behaviour of both the salespeople and the managers within a company.

"When we work internally with a company, there is no point in bringing us in for just one or two days," said Metcalfe. "This won't work – nothing changes. After 15 years of research – and our managing director Frank Salisbury has written four books on the subject – we feel that we are in an ideal position to train companies in what works and what doesn't. So we offer customised sales training to companies based on what the processes within their companies should be."

This is an important point, in that it identifies processes as key to successful sales. There are always going to be salespeople who can wing it, but without proper processes, again, the full potential companies will not be achieved. It is for this reason that a critical point in BTS' programmes is the development of line managers as sales coaches (part of its

offering is a Diploma in Sales Coaching).

"We use innovative techniques to get people to understand that sales is a process," said Metcalfe. "If they don't realise this, then they will never get any better at it. For me, selling is a discipline like any other, and the notion that salespeople have the gift of the gab is an old one. These people may make a living out of sales, but the sophistication of the modern world has dictated that there needs to be a lot more to selling than being a good talker."

The SII diploma offered by BTS, like many of its programmes, is based around blended learning, with classroom and on-line modules operating hand-in-hand with on-the-job training. Indeed, practical learning is at least as important as lectures in creating a more professional sales force.

"Knowledge on its own is not relevant," explained Charlie Mernagh, associate director with BTS. "Training in the classroom needs to be followed up with coaching on the road, and the two elements together are very important in making a good salesperson. And this is as true for small and medium-sized businesses as it is for larger companies."

