

MENTORING

Low Cost, Big Returns

What Every Dealer Can Do Now

By Trish Brock

When I started in this industry as a rookie dealer salesperson, I was given a few catalogs, a phone and a “good luck kid” pat on the back. I was one of 25 salespeople in a \$50 million dealership with what was basically a sink or swim culture.

Training was primarily product-oriented and our weekly “sales meetings” consisted largely of reps coming in and showing new products. And, while I had previous experience in sales, marketing and management, I was still a bit overwhelmed by the complexities and nuances of the industry.

I was given a few leads and then required to meet with my sales manager to give him weekly progress reports.

While I was following my directions, I often found myself chasing vacant lots,

libraries (we didn’t rep library furniture...) or a doctor’s office that needed only one or two chairs in the reception area.

One day my sales manager approached me and said, “Trish, you need to sell more.”

“No kidding,” I thought. Simply telling me to sell more but not showing me how wasn’t helping me become the star salesperson I so aspired to be.

This scenario is not unique to me. There are many industry veterans who can tell the same story from the “old days” and sadly, probably a few from today.

After a lot of hard work, frustration and sheer determination, I became a consistent top producer. But I often think about the talent who left and became successful more quickly and with less pain somewhere else.

I remember telling my sales manager that I wanted to know how successful sales people were winning jobs.

In a very competitive environment, simply asking that question doesn’t yield answers but I hoped that information could be shared.

What obstacles were they running into? How did they navigate difficult clients? How did they sell against competition with stronger value propositions? Which manufacturers would support them not only before but after the job was awarded? How did they network with commercial real estate brokers, the design community, etc.?

Intuitively, I knew it was the subtleties of the business that were going to give me the winning advantage.

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I could read a catalog as well as anyone but overcoming objections wasn't enough. Not only did I want to develop as a salesperson, I wanted to develop as a professional.

What I now realize is that I needed and wanted a mentor. While it's important to know products and acquire essential sales skills, the real information about how sales are transacted is what I was starved for.

It didn't take me long to realize that selling furniture is not done through a prescriptive process—there are way too many variables. The tacit information that is accumulated through years of experience is what I wanted someone to share with me.

I wanted to know how to manage a difficult customer, understand the multiple players and influencers on small and large projects, how to anticipate and manage problems that are inevitable with most projects, etc.

I wanted the play by play recap of a couple of hard won projects. What were the challenges and how were they managed and overcome? The path to winning is not straight and I wanted information on all the potential deviations.

What I wanted then are the same things that new and even experienced people want now.

As small businesses, dealers have traditionally struggled with how to train employees and get them up to speed and accelerate their profitability. Dealer principals often feel isolated, wondering how other dealers are managing similar challenges in different markets. And while sales and product training is necessary, it can be expensive and even then, the learning curve is still steep, feeling like an eternity.

The Case for Mentoring

Both large and small companies are realizing the many benefits of mentoring and finding creative and cost effective ways to implement programs.

“The goal is to use the knowledge that resides within an organization to its full advantage” says Samuel Greengard in *Workforce*, March 2002.

With four different generations now working together in the workplace, there are plenty of perspectives and experiences that are floating around in people's heads. And without effectively tapping into them, precious human capital could be wasted.

Mentoring often conjures the stereotype of an older business person who mentors a younger business person, but in fact, mentoring is really about a more experienced person sharing valuable insights with a less experienced person.

Mentoring can be one on one, among peers, there can be team mentoring, mentoring with a specialty advisor, a surrogate mentor (someone from outside the dealership but with dealer experience) or virtual mentoring. It can cross job functions, age, gender, be among peers and can cover an array of topics.

For example, Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, introduced reverse mentoring by which younger staff members helped senior staff members gain a more youthful perspective. Welch himself chose a younger mentor and tapped into his expertise to learn about the Internet and their competitors' web presence.

Research has proven repeatedly that there are sound business cases and strong ROI for mentoring. Consider:

- ▶ A study by the American Society for Training and Development found that training alone increased managerial productivity by 24%, but jumped to 88% when mentoring and coaching were combined.
- ▶ A national financial services institution realized an increase in new business generation of over 600% by a group in a mentoring program compared to a similar group not in the program (The Mentoring Company, 2009).
- ▶ Sapphire Technologies Worldwide's mentoring program gets “new hires up to speed faster...mentoring by a more senior person speeds up the learning curve. Taking three months to learn a job isn't possible anymore. Mentoring shaves weeks off an employee's training.” *Information Week*, April 09

What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is the transfer of tacit knowledge, the type of knowledge found in people's heads and nowhere else, from one set of employees to another.

In the absence of mentoring, important information and experiences are isolated within an individual's mind, and when the people who possess this knowledge retire or leave the company, that information leaves with them.

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Mentoring helps ensure that your assets, your people and the information they possess, are kept within your dealership.

As dealers downsize or people leave for other reasons, leveraging tacit information becomes even more critical than ever.

Coaching and Mentoring – Not the Same

While coaching and mentoring are often used interchangeably and they are both beneficial, there are distinct differences between the two.

Coaching often involves “telling or teaching” another. Think about a football coach: information is given but it’s usually a one-way conversation. The person being coached is usually told how to do something, and then expected to do it that way.

The coach is often responsible for the mentee’s success or failure. Coaching is usually based on short-term needs and administered intermittently on an “as-needed” basis. Often the coach is the boss. This would describe many sales managers’ roles.

Mentoring promotes learning in a different way. The mentor will share information, experiences and perspectives but then allows the mentee to assimilate the information and reach their own conclusion.

A wise mentor knows that there is more than one solution to any problem and resists the temptation to solve the problem for their mentee. He or she will give the mentee the latitude to solve the problem themselves under a watchful eye. The mentee is in charge of his or her own learning.

The mentor role is heavy on listening, providing a role model and making suggestions and connections. The relationship is long term. The responsibility is on the mentee to ask the questions and learn from the wisdom and experiences offered. The mentee is not expected to do things just like the mentor, but rather use the shared experiences in ways that will enhance their own performance.

A good mentor will help the mentee identify and build their strengths and develop strategies for minimizing their weakness. A good mentor will encourage the mentee to explore the possibilities to bring fresh ideas and solutions to the dealer.

The mentor is seldom the mentee’s boss. Most experts insist that the mentor not be in the other person’s chain of command.

How to Mentor

In a paper on mentoring, the American Productivity and Quality Center outlined the basic skills required to be a successful mentor. In short:

- 1. Observation** – Strive for objectivity, take notes and evaluate the protégé’s actions without being judgmental. Have established criteria to evaluate performance which have been developed through personal experience.
- 2. Listening** – Be attentive, patient and encourage the mentee to speak freely while keeping an open mind to understand the content behind responses. Don’t interrupt. Resist the temptation to “tell” the mentee what to do. A mentor listens and will ask questions, allowing the mentee to discover their own solutions.
- 3. Empathy** – Adopt the perspective of the other person to better understand what they are thinking and feeling. This positions you to ask questions that will reveal additional information and create a stronger learning experience. Don’t expect the mentee to think and be just like you, but do position yourself as a role model.
- 4. Verbal Communication Skills** – Strong verbal skills will allow you to be explicit and thorough when speaking and listening. Ask open-ended questions to elicit more than simple one-word answers and to promote a deeper understanding.

As dealers look for ways to accelerate productivity, thrive in a challenging economic climate, retain top talent, gain market share and improve leadership skills, consider that the skills and information needed might be right under your roof or close by.

Implementing a mentoring program could ignite increased learning and performances to propel your dealer to the next level, even in this economy.

Trish Brock, Principal of Trish Brock & Associates, is a well-known industry consultant. Her cross functional consulting group specializes in increasing sales through effective differentiating brands and materials that support the strategic sales process. TB+A also conducts Mentoring Circles for groups wanting to accelerate new business development. She can be reached at 720-747-5547, via email at tbrock@trishbrockassociates.com or visit her on the web at www.trishbrockassociates.com

