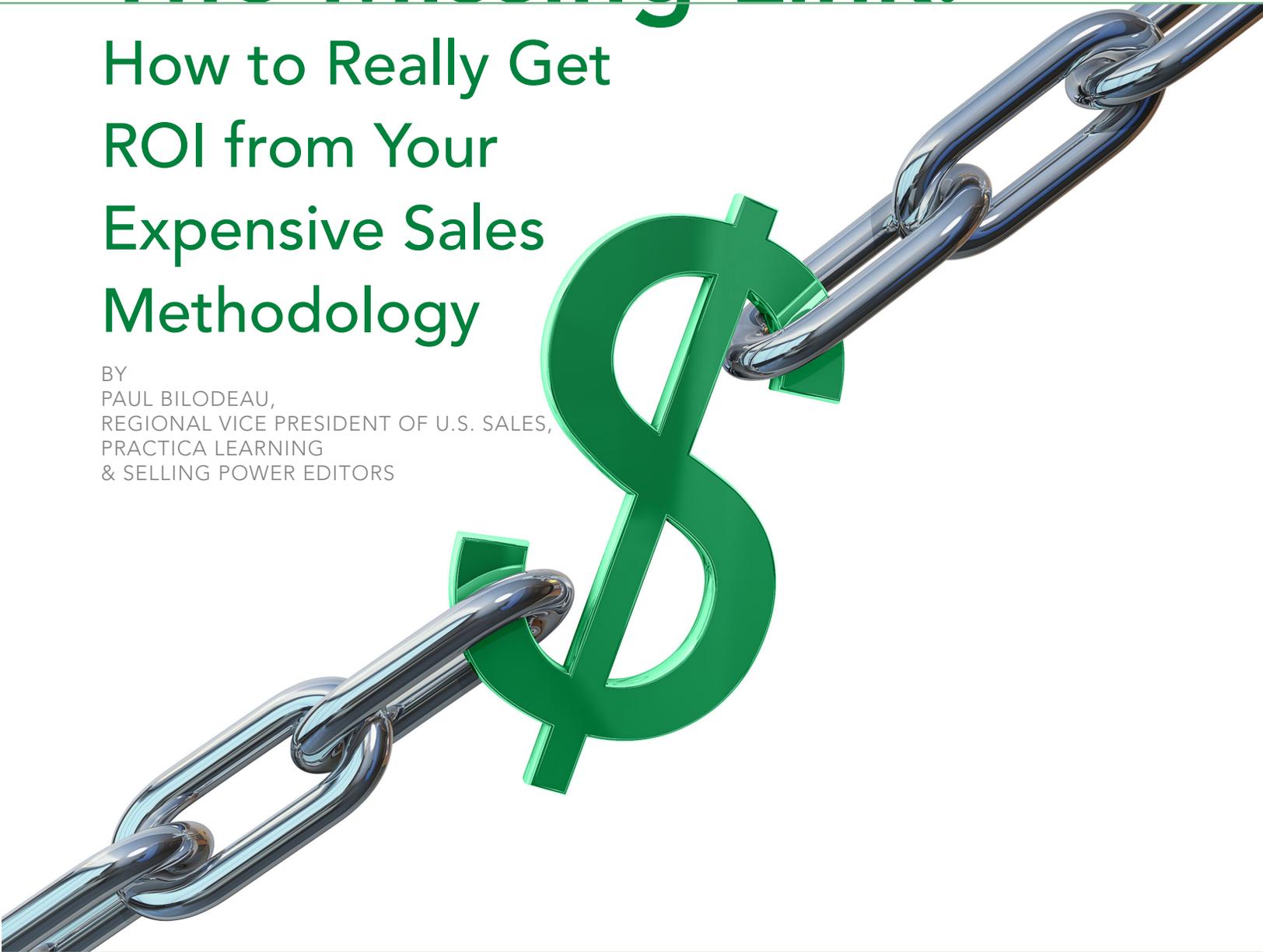


The Missing Link:

How to Really Get ROI from Your Expensive Sales Methodology

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SellingPower



Executive Summary: There's a better way to get ROI from your sales-enablement investment and empower your salespeople to have value-based conversations with their prospects. It's called "deliberate practice," and it's helping enterprise sales organizations create high-performance sales teams by moving average salespeople to the top tier and getting more consistent results from their top performers.

As a sales leader, you know how important it is for your salespeople to have high-quality, informed, and intelligent conversations with prospects. Key decision makers don't have the time or patience to talk with salespeople who show up simply to rattle off a pitch of generic features and benefits. During the past 15 years, buyers have moved increasingly to online interactions – and further away from traditional relationships with salespeople.

What does today's buyer want? According to a Gartner report on marketing influences in the tech sector, executives want to hear stories, benefits, and business outcomes specific to their particular situation. This means your sales team's ability to articulate value and draw on real business acumen during sales conversations in your sector is also going to be your number one differentiator.

To this end, it's likely you've already made significant sales-enablement investments. You've invested in a formal sales methodology, complete with training to get your sales team up to speed on selling skills and best practices. You have a sales process in place. You have excellent frontline managers to support individual salespeople. In other words, you've got a team full of great potential.

Yet the same Gartner report shows that sales teams they studied are not doing a good job of communicating the business outcomes and value their technology offerings provide. Only [34 percent of executives](#) reported that salespeople can successfully communicate value. We believe this applies to most, if not all, industries – not simply technology.

Are Your Salespeople Having Meaningful Conversations with Customers?

So why are your salespeople going into meetings and failing to have meaningful conversations around value with savvy prospects – especially after you paid a lot of money to help them acquire those very skills? Talk to some experts and they'll say your sales training failed. Or that you need a new sales methodology specific to your industry.

Having worked with many enterprise sales organizations, we have a slightly different answer. And it doesn't involve investing in yet another sales methodology – or retraining your team.

Simply put, you need the missing link: [deliberate practice](#).

Two Major Problems with Sales Training

In a recent [Selling Power webinar](#) on the topic of sales training and deliberate practice, participants were asked how likely a traditional sales training approach – classroom learning, workbooks, and supporting content – was to improve the performance of salespeople. Here are the results.

- 70 percent of webinar participants said this approach would yield “slight improvement.”
- 9 percent said this approach would yield “lasting improvement.”
- 17 percent believed this approach would yield “major improvement.”

Sales training is absolutely necessary, but current approaches to training pose at least two major drawbacks.

Drawback #1: Salespeople forget classroom training. Most salespeople retain only a small percentage of the skills they’re trained on in a classroom setting. Research reported by Xerox has shown that 87 percent of knowledge from sales training programs is lost within 120 days.

Similarly, research has also shown that the best way to learn is not by sitting and listening passively – even if you have quizzes, workbooks, and other supporting content. Instead, the best way to cultivate new skills and retain information is through [active learning](#). Salespeople especially respond well by *doing* rather than just listening and taking notes.

Traditionally, active learning takes place on coaching calls, when sales managers accompany salespeople on field sales calls. However, many sales managers typically have only enough time to go out on ride-alongs with salespeople perhaps once a month. That leaves a lot of important sales calls where salespeople are not putting their proper skills on display and are leaving without moving the sale forward to the next stage – with no manager there to help them correct their mistakes with immediate feedback.

Drawback #2: Many salespeople tend to stay in their comfort zones or revert to bad habits in high-pressure situations. When they’re in high-pressure meetings with important prospects, many salespeople fail to put the right skills into practice – even when they know what they should be doing. Because of the pressure, they simply fail to apply their good skills.

Think about it. If you gave a salesperson a quiz right now and asked him to identify an open-ended versus a closed-ended question, he’d probably pass the quiz easily. However, put that same salesperson in a situation with a prospect, and suddenly the salesperson asks a series of closed-ended questions that effectively shut down the conversation.

This issue of the environment in which skills are being deployed is key. Salespeople can be experts and possess all the necessary skills to succeed. But they also need to be high performers – especially during critical moments, when performance matters most.

Think of this as the “free throw effect.” Picture, for a moment, a basketball player poised to take a free throw. That player might have practiced her free throw hundreds of times. On her

own, in practice, without an audience, she sinks the free throw almost every time. However, put that same player in the fourth quarter of a playoff game – with all the noise and attention of a hyped-up crowd – and the pressure gets to her. She fails to deliver the performance of which she’s fully capable.

What Is “Deliberate Practice?”

The way to avoid these sales-training pitfalls is with “deliberate practice.” Deliberate practice is purposeful and intentional as opposed to mindless, repetitive practice. It provides immediate and strategic feedback to the learner. And it simulates the conditions of a high-pressure environment.

Think back to our free throw example. The basketball player who practices alone – in an environment that’s nothing like a real-live game – will not make the same improvements as a player who has a coach who is watching; providing feedback, encouragement, and corrections; and creating unique drills to simulate the high-pressure situation of a game.

Salespeople have similar needs in terms of needing feedback and intentional coaching. Again, learning is enhanced by actual practice (as opposed to passive classroom learning). It’s enhanced even further by the presence of a coach or mentor who can provide timely, intelligent, and targeted feedback. Salespeople need to practice those meaningful conversations they’re supposed to be having in the field, in a one-to-one practice situation that simulates the high-pressure environments in which they’ll operate.

More than 80 Practica Learning Performance Coaches do just that with sales teams – and the results are pleasantly surprising to sales leaders. We build custom scenarios that are based on the real-life business environment of our clients. These are live, scheduled, scenario-based practice sessions designed to work with whatever sales methodology or training you currently have in place.

Deliberate Practice: Success Stories

How do salespeople perform after having engaged in deliberate practice? We worked with one pharmaceutical company that told us its salespeople needed to be more interesting, engaging, and memorable during meetings with busy and expert doctors and healthcare professionals. These salespeople are selling a highly technical product; to overcome objections, they needed in-depth knowledge. After a round of deliberate practice, salespeople were more easily able to provide prospects with value-based statements and display business acumen. Overall, the market share for that particular drug increased 12 percent over a nine-month period following the company’s practice session with us.

Another client, an insurance company, had 200 managers who wanted to improve their

coaching with salespeople. The client had a system in place that captured a good deal of data about salespeople and their accounts to facilitate coaching for managers. What they lacked, however, was information about the behaviors of salespeople. We created four one-on-one telephone scenarios where the manager could listen and coach the salesperson following a sales conversation. The results included a 9 percent increase of each individual salesperson meeting his or her target. And the surveys from salespeople about their level of satisfaction with deliberate practice were off the charts. Net Promoter Scores were north of 90 percent!



Takeaways and Conclusions

We know from experience that the traditional approach to sales training leaves too many gaps to create truly high-performance sales teams. When salespeople have the opportunity to engage in deliberate practice, they're able to achieve a whole new level of empowerment and achievement. We're consistently able to help top performers get better results – and to help average performers move into the top tier. These salespeople are far better equipped to have value-centered discussions with prospects, which, in turn, differentiates their company's services and offerings in their market.

Most salespeople already possess the skills they need. The issue is putting those skills into practice in the right situation. Deliberate practice is the key to giving salespeople the confidence to put their knowledge into action – even in high-pressure selling situations.

Want to see an example of deliberate practice? Contact our team to set up a free, live demo and learn how it works.

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About the Author

As the regional vice president of Sales for [Practica Learning](#), Paul Bilodeau is responsible for developing the strategy and leading the execution of sales within the United States. He brings more than 17 years of learning-and-development experience to this role, which includes leading transformational initiatives with more than 150 organizations. Paul has also served in various senior executive positions – most recently as the vice president of Sales and Marketing with The Brooks Group (recognized as Selling Power's Top 20 Sales Training Company of the Year). In 2000, Paul founded Sequential Selling in Calgary, Canada, and sold the company in 2011. On topics related to sales effectiveness and sales leadership, he has presented at events for ISA, EcSell Institute, and ATD. As a sales leader, sales leadership trainer, and business owner, he is extremely passionate about helping training departments and sales organizations drive results.

About Selling Power

In addition to [Selling Power magazine](#), the leading periodical for sales managers and sales VPs since 1981, Selling Power Inc. produces the [Sales Management Digest](#) and [Daily Boost of Positivity](#) newsletters, as well as a [five-minute video series](#) featuring interviews with top executives. Selling Power is a regular media sponsor of the [Sales 2.0 Conference](#).