By Rick Hill

How to avoid sales meeting headaches

At my last estimate I have attended, produced and suffered in over 300 sales meetings, from over 100 different companies. I have been wined, dined and "Power-Pointed" to death. I consider myself a Sales Meeting Veteran with a P.h.D. from the School of Hard Knocks.

Sales meetings are a massive expense in both time and money. They take every salesperson out of the field along with many of the inside support and management staff. Even if you are a small woodworking shop with only a couple of people that sell or even greet customers, the percentage of time not selling is the same as with a large company team. Sales meetings can involve expenses for food, hotels, flights, room rentals, car rentals and even entertainment. So here is a checklist of the dos and don'ts of sales meetings.

THE DOs

1. Have a true goal.

The stated goal of most sales meetings is to educate the sales staff on new products and re-motivate them to increase their sales. Though the goal is important, it is not memorable. Try to distill your goal into one easy-to-remember sentence. That sentence guides the whole meeting and becomes the reference point and rallying cry of your sales team. Keep it in the forefront of every activity and speaker you have planned for your sales meeting. Political historians discuss the first Bill Clinton campaign and how the James Carville's phrase "It's the Economy, Stupid." kept the campaign and Clinton on track. Your goal needs to be as easy to remember and as focused. For example, if more sales volume is the goal, then "Volume is our Vision" is the focus of your meeting. Any discussions you lead and questions you receive can be channeled to that phrase.

2. Use the goal to stay focused.

Use the goal to focus on sales issues, new products, competitive products, marketing promotions, pricing, product demonstrations and success stories from other salespeople. If the topic has nothing to do with selling, eliminate it from the meeting.

3. Manage the questions.

Allow time for questions, but limit them to sales topics and success stories. This is not the time for people to bring up individual problems with individual accounts unless the whole team can benefit from the discussion. Depending on your crew, you might have to allow time for the complaints to be aired. Set aside an hour on the schedule specifically for complaining. Set this hour aside on the first morning so the rest of the meeting can stay on a positive focus. To keep the complaints on topic, write them down on the White Board or flip chart for all to see. Get all complaints first; then go down the list and answer them. This keeps the control of the meeting in your hands and allows the complainers to feel heard. It also keeps the same complaint from coming up over and over again. You can elect to answer them all in order immediately or as you go through the meeting. After you have taken care of each complaint, check it off so people know it is handled and done.

4. Have an attitude of gratitude.

Award the strong players in front of their peers; pass out the trophies and the plaques. The weak players already know who they are and do not need to be berated in public. Save that for personal consultations.

5. Unite the subgroups.

Get the rookies and veterans to sit together and learn from each other. They both have unique ideas and methods that can be shared. Avoid doing basic sales training for the rookies in the sales meeting. The veterans' bored attitude will rub off on the rookies quickly.

6. Make amenities readily available.

Supply plenty of paper and power outlets to recharge phones and laptops. Make sure that wireless and data connections are available.

7. Emphasize marketing.

Promote new products that are ready for market. Focus your team on products that have samples and marketing material already in place.

8. Have a success dinner.

If your team is staying overnight, provide an evening meal with the goal of talking about the success that each individual is having. Make a menu with topics of discussion highlighting those individuals and allowing them their time in the limelight of their peers. By having a Success Dinner, you focus attitudes on the good that is being done, not the failures. Shuttle the team in vans or buses from the hotel to the dinner. Do it professionally so that no one has to worry about driving at night or having a glass of wine at the meal.

9. Provide marketing materials.

Provide finished sample kits of any items that the salespeople will need to show. We once attended a sales meeting for a line of very high-end, hand-carved wood table legs. The whole meeting was focused on the beauty of these hand-carved legs and the uniqueness of each style. After the meeting each salesperson was sent one leg, in a cheap cardboard box stamped, "Made in China." The legs promptly went in our car trunks with our other samples and quickly picked up water stains, oil and grime. How much easier it would have been to provide a simple wooden box that doubled as a presentation case. If you are going to the expense of bringing everyone in for a sales meeting, be proactive and make sure that the samples they are going to show to the customers will arrive in the best possible condition.

10. Take notes and share them.

Lastly, make sure to send each participant a bullet point list that details the most important selling points of the meeting. Send this as a separate e-mail or snail mail about a week after the meeting. This reminds everyone of the goal, message and selling points one more time.

We attended a rotten sales meeting a few years ago that reinforces these points well. We spent Sunday in an airport so we could fly in on a Sunday night. We arrived in our hotels in time to realize that no restaurants or, for us Northern folks, supper clubs, were open. No food nearby, no liquor and no hospitality. The meeting was at 8 sharp the next morning, but when we assembled in the lobby, there were no shuttle busses or company vans around. So we crammed seven people into the few rental cars we had and made it to the plant. When we got there, we were assembled on the plant floor in metal folding chairs and the speakers contended with the plant noise, forklifts and cold concrete for the whole two days.

For the first two hours, we listened to the vice president of finance talk about the new expense form and car allowance. Then the rest of the day was spent with a parade of plant and office personnel discussing their new forms, procedures and problems they had with the sales team. That night, everyone crammed into the cars and tried to find a local eatery before heading back to the hotel.

The next day was the same. At the end of the day, after 12 hours of solid boredom and uncomfortable, cold conditions, the sales manager tried to motivate his team with new products and goals. No one listened.

Remember your goal. New procedures, new car programs, health insurance forms, and the daily grind it takes to run a company are needed, but not at a sales meeting. Send those procedures to the people that need them via e-mail, discuss new programs via a conference call, or make personal calls to the individuals that need to change their methods, but leave them out of a sales meeting. Focus on sales, sales and more sales.

THE DON'TS

1. Don't let other departments take the floor.

Don't allow the vice president of accounting, sample coordinator, quality control technician, lab technician or CFO to speak. Remember your goal. Your goal is to motivate your sales team, get them selling more, and to get them focused on the new products. Anything that draws away from this motivation will attack your goal. Yes, the vice president of accounting wants to get the sales team to fill out their expense reports fully and discuss, in detail, the new lunch reimbursements. Just remind the vice president of the sales meeting goal and ask her to put the new rules in a memo.

2. Don't get cheap on the setting.

You have asked everyone to sacrifice their personal and work time to attend your sales meeting.

Make sure that the meeting is held in a comfortable, quiet room with good chairs. Give them plenty of choices of drink and healthy snacks. Allow for several scheduled bathroom breaks. Avoid having the sales meeting in the plant where noise and interruptions from fellow co-workers will prolong the meeting. If you have a national sales force, consider having the meeting at hotel near a hub airport.

3. Don't start your meeting on a Monday.

Most salespeople are often away from home. They consider their time at home and with their families sacred. Allow them to travel on a Monday, have the meeting on a Tuesday and head home during the week. Also avoid doing your sales meeting near holidays. Yes, business is a little slower then, but it is also the time most people plan vacations and family time. Have a heart.

4. Don't mix your sales teams.

If you sell products to several different types of markets with different sales teams, keep them separate. Nothing is more frustrating than spending an hour listening to a discussion about a product you can't sell. If you are trying to build cross-market selling, have a top salesperson from the other market come talk about their successes.

5. Safeguard against interruptions.

Don't allow interruptions from other staff, phone calls or e-mails. Give a schedule at the start that details the breaks and how long they will be. Allow at least 20 minutes for people to use the bathroom, return important customer calls, and answer e-mails. During one seminar I attended, the presenter put out a donation bucket for Make-A-Wish. The rule was that if the phone rang or e-mails were taken, $5 was to be donated to the bucket. The first phone that went off was, of course, the presenter's as everyone called him immediately.

6. Don't be a lecturer.

Set up other salespeople to discuss their recent successes. Bring in industry colleagues or experts to highlight the important points. Use videos, props and products to keep everyone interested. If you are a smaller shop, you can still use this technique. Bring in the local home builder to talk about his problems with cabinet installers. Have an architect or designer speak on the challenges they see from their side of the fence.

7. Only promote what they should be selling.

Don't promote anything that isn't ready for market. New products that haven't been tested, products that do not have pricing, samples or programs will just frustrate your team.

8. Present, don't narrate.

Don't read from PowerPoint slides. Ever. Not ever, never ever. We are all adults here, and we can all read from the slide as well as you. Use the PowerPoint to bring up bullet points that need discussion, not as novellas that are yet to be published.

9. Don't force entertainment on the group.

If you want to set up a golf outing or a volleyball game, do so and ask for volunteers. Those that want to will and those that don't can catch an early flight.

As manufacturers we often forget that no matter what we make, someone still has to go out and sell it. If we motivate and support the sales team with half of the effort we use to run our plants, we will never lack for potential customers.

Ed. note: Rick Hill helps woodworking companies analyze their sales process. He is also the founder of WoodReps.com and president of OnPoint Sales, a Midwest Independent Rep firm. He can be contacted at www.onpointsales.com.