

Improving sales performance at Prentice-Hall with sales simulations, blogs and podcasts

When Prentice-Hall Business Publishing met for its annual sales meeting in Orlando this year, conference organizers made sure that sessions weren't going to be used to catch up on lost sleep. Instead of a parade of basic PowerPoint slides and endless monologues, reps got up to speed on the company's 2006 strategy by playing video games on their computers.

Working in pairs, they practiced selling a new financial accounting textbook to virtual business professor Mary Green of River City College. They tried their hands at introducing themselves, probing for customer needs, positioning the product and closing the sale - all without leaving their laptops. Professor Green told reps to back off when they got too aggressive, and she began to go cold in the interview when they strayed from key messages.

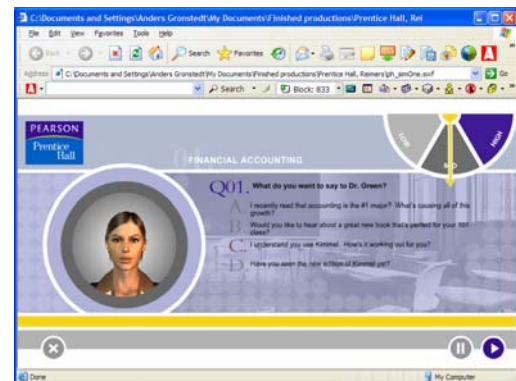
This exciting new sales simulator is just one of the new training and communication tools unveiled by Prentice-Hall at the meeting. The sales force was also introduced to a new suite of Podcasts, which are fully integrated with all of the Business Publishing Division's initiatives. Reps can now use their iPods to catch up with the latest sales process and product wisdom from the company's top subject matter experts as they're taking care of administrative tasks, walking across campus, working out or driving to client meetings. And finally, to ensure an ongoing dialogue with their peers and sales/marketing leaders, the company introduced reps to "PlayDough," the new sales community blog.

Clearly Prentice-Hall is determined to innovate its way to the top of the hyper-competitive business textbook sector, but it wasn't always this way. "Our problem was the gap between product launches and sales training," explains Eric Frank, Director of Marketing for the Business Publishing Division. Like most sales organizations, Prentice-Hall reps learned generic sales skills from the occasional two-day immersive sales training program, and product information from product teams in the format of annual sales meetings and an avalanche of e-mails. Says Frank: "It was left to the individual rep to pull all of this disconnected information together into a coherent customer conversation, and the first chance you had to do that was with a real customer. Not exactly the best place to practice."

Companies that are serious about developing a customer focused field organization, like Prentice-Hall, are starting to rethink learning. The prevailing instructional dogma rooted in a 1,000 year-old academic tradition is giving way to a next-generation blended learning approach that takes full advantage of the power and cost-efficiency of new electronic technologies. Sales training is no longer about watching, reading and listening, but about doing, simulating, socializing, sharing and collaborating. The maturation of a new wave of online applications and tools, such as blogs, podcasts, online gaming, and wireless and mobile technologies, is driving ever-greater levels of sales and service productivity.

Online simulation

Gronstedt Group custom-developed the first in a series of online scenario-based simulations for Prentice-Hall, allowing field reps the opportunity to practice strategies for improving their selling skills. The simulation provides an effective, on-point learning experience that reps can immediately put into play with customers. If they pitch a benefit that doesn't resonate with the on-screen professor, who's closely modeled on



the actual professors that reps encounter when they visit campuses, she'll let them know with remarks that can vary from polite and subtle to brisk and dismissive. The smart sales person can quickly decipher "I don't think you're tracking with me." In turn, high performers, who will probably know they're on the right track when Dr. Green starts talking about getting "yellow smiles at ratemyprofessor.com," will close the sale and be rewarded both with prizes and recognition on the blog.

By playing these simulations, reps can effectively learn about their products within the context of a simulated customer conversation, and plenty of research demonstrates the value of learning by doing. The value of online simulations is to replicate situations that can be played out without the risk of failure. Airplane crashes don't hurt nearly as bad in a flight simulator as they do in real life, and it's likewise more cost-efficient for salespeople to make mistakes in a simulator than to deal with the fallout of customer defection and lost productivity associated with on-the-job training. Simulations allow reps to practice in a safe environment. Reps can learn from mistakes, try out new behaviors, practice and practice again.

Podcasting: What's Your Point?

A lot of companies are starting to realize that if their reps are on the road, their rep training and communications need to be mobile, too. For this reason, mp3 player-enabled podcasts are emerging as an increasingly effective tool.

Prentice-Hall's new series of online radio programs, entitled "What's Your Point?" are designed to reinforce key messages, introduce book authors, and keep reps updated on an ongoing basis via a conversational, news/talk format that's both informative and entertaining.

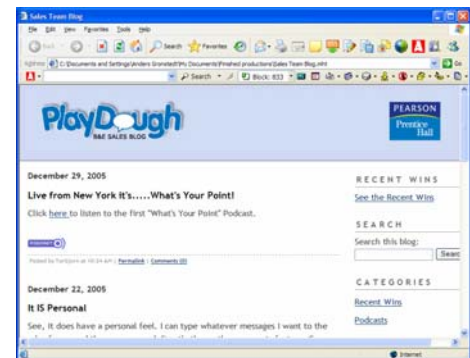
These programs aren't simply time-shifted lectures. Instead, they're carefully crafted "edutainment" shows featuring "Sam Savage," a professional radio host, and a cast of in-studio guest experts. They take simulated call-in questions from characters portraying reps, competitors and other interested industry-watchers, and the show is peppered with gag "commercials" for competitor products, assuring that the talk radio metaphor is played to the hilt.

Sales community blog

To enable ongoing updates and genuine dialogue, Gronstedt Group helped Prentice-Hall develop a new sales community blog that facilitates real-time conversations in the far-flung field organization. Eric Frank writes personal entries in this online journal and invites reps' comments and discussions.

The PlayDough blog accomplishes a number of important objectives:

- comments on recent wins and losses and provides insights and helpful sales tips;
- recounts conversations with reps, professors, students, and Prentice-Hall book authors;
- links to other useful resources (internal and external) and offers context for news, competitor announcements, Prentice-Hall releases and more; and
- facilitates sharing of information between reps - they're the true experts on what works, and this is the opportunity for them to share their experiences and learn from each other.



Most importantly, the blog serves as a forum for free-flowing conversations. It's an engine for sharing experiences from the front lines across the sales organization without inundating reps with e-mail. They can read the musings, rants, raves, insights and opinions of their peers and weigh in on conversations about pressing issues that will help them better do their jobs.

Reps can also find the latest podcasts and download them from PlayDough. The integration of the podcasts with the blog is a critical step in building and engaging an online community and helping transform the podcast into a two-way, listener-driven medium. Thanks to the blog, shows can be based on themes raised by sales reps, and they can answer specific questions and concerns in ways that are more meaningful and easier to manage than another e-mail salvo.

A competitive advantage

The Prentice-Hall Business Publishing field organization has been ecstatic about this new suite of integrated communication tools. "The feedback from the field has been phenomenal," says Frank. "This campaign has kicked off a new wave of communication across the organization, where newsletters and e-mail blasts are being replaced by this new approach to strategic and tactical communications."

As companies struggle to wring the last drop of efficiency out of front line workers' transactional activities - the sales automations systems, proposal generators and unified contact center solutions - they're increasingly turning their attention to the soft skills, the tacit capabilities of the customer-facing organization. With variability between high- and low-performing sales and service reps still greater than 50% in most organizations, field communication and training is green pasture for improvements. Prentice-Hall's Business Publishing Division is creating a formidable competitive advantage with a mix of technology and people that drive integrated and unique capabilities to connect and interact with customers.

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