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Using Training and Company Visits as Marketing Tools

by **BRIAN GAULER**

Include international salespeople in your training programs.

Small businesses can strengthen their contacts with international trade partners and customers by turning some inherent disadvantages to their advantage.

One of the unavoidable problems with doing business globally is the distances that are normally involved. Travel can be a significant resource drain for most foreign intermediaries, such as sales representatives, agents and distributors. So, anything U.S. companies can do to ease that burden has potential as a "marketing tool."

Two things companies should consider are corporate training and company visitation programs.

Corporate Training

Most, if not all, companies have some type of training they provide to better equip their salespeople to sell their products or services. This training may be informal, but in some manner it probably exists.

This type of training is equally important to the international intermediary's salesperson, who seldom receives proper training because of the distances involved.

An organized corporate training program, which may actually offer nothing more than what is already being provided informally, can be a good opportunity to build a stronger relationship with international partners. Companies should consider that their training can provide value to foreign participants far beyond simply learning more about a company's products. But still, there is the problem of distance and accessibility for international participants.

Timely scheduling and better communication can enhance a company's training programs by making it easier for foreign partners to participate.

Scheduling a Training Event

If the training can be scheduled in conjunction with a major U.S. industry trade show, that provides the opportunity for foreign companies to attend two events basically for the price of one (at least for transportation).

For example, scheduling a training event shortly following a major trade show allows foreign participants to book their airfare to include the company's training event. And, if the company provides local transportation, meals and lodg-

ing once the participant arrives at the company's location, any additional expenses are limited. The net result is the foreign intermediary is encouraged to attend both events, and it's a winning situation for all involved. Perhaps the greatest benefit all around is the opportunity to establish stronger working relationships through personal interaction between key players.

Communication

Good communication is important to the success of promoting a training program. This not only means being in contact with those companies or individuals that you want to participate, but also creating good communication materials to showcase your event. Remember, if you do schedule your training around a major U.S. trade show event, your materials will be "competing" with those sent by the trade show sponsors. You want your materials to look as professional and enticing as the tradeshow brochures and flyers.

Also keep in mind that trade show events are well organized, so it's essential that you be too. By preparing an agenda and providing detailed marketing materials for your training, you can "piggyback" on the tradeshow event. Two materials to consider include an invitation cover letter from senior company management and a communication piece with specifics regarding the training. If your company will cover any participant costs, that information is definitely worth highlighting.

It is important to communicate before, during and after the training. The company or individual must be invited well in advance of the event. Once they arrive, they should be given information regarding the training agenda and schedule of events. Don't forget after-training social hours and dinner events, including an "awards dinner" with a presentation of training certificates by your company leadership. Other necessary information includes logistics (transportation to/from their lodging, etc.), and any general information that will make their stay more pleasant. You can ask your local chamber of commerce or tourism office for printed visitor's information, which will show events and items that may be of interest to training participants.

After participants leave, follow up by thank-

ing them and asking for their feedback about the training. This confirms to them that you are truly interested in establishing an ongoing working relationship and value their attendance.

Recruiting Potential

Generally, the U.S. company hosting an event will invite those foreign companies and/or individuals they have a relationship with. However, a scheduled training program can also serve as a means for recruiting intermediary prospects.

Any time a company can spend extended time with a prospect showing them their company strengths, such as people, facilities and product features, the possibility of establishing a working relationship is greatly enhanced. Knowing this, it's equally important that the company only invite those prospects that have a potential for an effective and mutually beneficial partnership. By doing so, company representatives can give their full attention to high-value participants that are pre-qualified by virtue of their attending the major trade show.

Corporate Visits

If your company does not promote internal training events, or if they cannot be scheduled to take advantage of a major domestic industry trade show event, you may want to consider establishing a company visitation program to encourage people to visit you at your location.

The same elements apply to a visitation program as to the training program. The only difference is you should limit the time to three days. Day 1 for arrival (be sure to personally pick them up at the airport), Day 2 for visiting your company and Day 3 for departure (personally returning them to the airport). Be sure to have an agenda with a detailed schedule, and incorporate some product demonstrations along with social activities, such as dinner or a visit to the home of a company manager who will have further association with them.

Companies can potentially gain great results with either a training program or company visitation. Need proof? How many times have you received people at your company who arrive as "strangers" and leave as "friends"? Relationship building for international intermediaries is, perhaps, the best marketing tool.

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