

Livening Up Your Sales Meetings



OR...

*Sitting Around the
Sales Campfire*



Brian Jeffrey

Do your sales meetings make a funeral look like a festive event? Are people arriving late and leaving early? It doesn't have to be that way. Learn how to turn your sales meetings into a not-to-be-missed affair.

Enjoy the read.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian J". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "B" and a long, trailing "J".

Brian Jeffrey
President
Quintarra Consulting Inc



Quintarra Consulting Inc
1451 Donald Munro Dr | Carp, ON K0A 1L0 Canada
613-839-7355 | Quintarra.com

Livening Up Your Sales Meetings

by Brian Jeffrey



Face-to-face sales meetings are the best way for communicating with your salespeople. Telephone, e-mail, voice mail and paper are secondary mediums. A well-run meeting can be a very motivating and invigorating event. Unfortunately, most sales meetings are not well run. They have all the motivating aspects of a funeral service and can be downright depressing, particularly if they turn into finger-pointing and bitching sessions.

Nobody starts out to have a poor sales meeting. But, like many other things, if you don't know what you should be doing, there's a high probability of doing it wrong.

When properly executed, the sales meeting is a two-way communication medium that helps keep problems to a minimum and builds team spirit. Potential problems can be brought into the open before they become too big. While the sales meeting doesn't eliminate problems,

it sure can help catch them before they catch you. And, if everyone is involved in the solution-finding process, there's a sense of teamwork.

FREQUENCY

With advertising, if it's not done often enough, the public tends to forget the message. Same with sales meetings. Whatever your message to the sales team, if they don't hear it enough, they'll forget it. And that's why salespeople lose their focus and get off track.

If you're not holding weekly or bi-weekly sales meetings, start doing so — particularly when sales are below par and morale is low. As the situation improves, meetings can be held less frequently, but you should have one every month at least. Some companies have an annual or bi-annual sales meeting and think they are effectively communicating with their salespeople. They're not.

NOTE: The basic rules for successful sales meetings are:

- Hold them often (minimum one a month).
 - Keep them short (30-90 minutes).
 - Make them relevant (sales-oriented, not administrative).
 - Keep them on track (have an agenda).
-

WHAT'S THE PURPOSE?

Use these sales meetings to build on your salespeople's successes and to help them learn from their failures. In tough times you'll have to talk about tough situations at your meetings. But don't start your meeting with problems. Plan to start off with some of the positive things that have happened since the last meeting before going on to more sensitive topics.

Keep close control on the meeting so it doesn't turn into a general "bitching" session. Use an agenda to gently keep the participants on

track and on topic. End the meeting on some kind of high or inspirational/motivational note. Be careful that your motivational message doesn't come across as pure hype. Salespeople hate to be sold a bill of goods. You can avoid this danger by planning what you want to say and by being totally sincere.

Also use these meetings to monitor progress and to ensure your salespeople are setting weekly goals that are realistic and attainable. Be careful here. If goals are set too high and aren't achieved, morale will suffer another blow. When morale drops too far, the sales department becomes a major part of the problem rather than a key to the solution.

Enter Their Minds Through Their Stomachs

Here's an idea you may want to consider. Invest in a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly breakfast sales meeting. This combination of a social and work-related meeting can be a real morale booster.

Years ago, I had great success with Friday pizza luncheons where the entire company (about 15 of us) got together each Friday at noon. We got more accomplished in that informal hour-and-a-half luncheon than at most formal meetings. And the social aspect kept the morale high, even during tough times. Why? Because there was open communication, there were no taboo topics, and everyone was aware of our economic and sales situation at all times. The meetings eliminated the necessity for a grapevine within our firm. In this particular situation, I included the entire company at the luncheon because of the small number.

This same approach works well for just the sales department. And you can occasionally invite "guests" from other departments to join your meeting to discuss specific problems and challenges in an informal setting.

For those first-thing-in-the-morning meetings, consider designating someone to pick up some morning munchies such as donuts or muffins.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL SALES MEETINGS

The first key to making sure your meetings, sales or otherwise, are well run and successful is to have a good reason for meeting. Here are seven:

1. *To inform.*

Regular meetings keep your people up to date on what's happening, reduce rumours, and get new product and administrative information distributed quickly.

2. *To plan.*

A good way of generating ideas from the team to help the company get to where it wants to go.

3. *To inspire.*

Selling is hard and people get down. A sales meeting is an opportunity to inspire and motivate.

4. *To educate.*

Meetings are a great time to do some product and sales training.

5. *To reward.*

Meetings present a super opportunity to recognize individual or team accomplishments.

6. *To evaluate.*

Let the troops know where they stand in performance on a year-to-date basis.

7. *To build team spirit.*

Whether you meet once a week or once a year, the sales meeting is another opportunity to strengthen the bond that exists between team members and between the team and the sales manager.

Successful sales meetings have a number of features in common:

- They are *short*.
- There's a *specific purpose* for the meeting.
- There's an *agenda*.
- The agenda is sent out *in advance*.
- The meeting *stays on track*.
- The meeting *starts on time* and more importantly...
- It *finishes on time*.
- They are *lively*.
- The meeting room is *comfortable*.
- The chairs are *soft*.
- Someone is in *control*.
- *Refreshments* are available.
- There are frequent *breaks* (longer meetings).
- People leave *on a high*.
- There's a written *summary*.

BEST TIMES TO HOLD MEETINGS

The only general rule is that sales meetings (or any other meeting for that matter) should not interfere with prime selling time. So, if your prime selling time is early in the day, plan your meetings for late in the day and vice versa.

The earlier in the day you have your meeting, the better. Avoid mid-day meetings because they break up the selling day. End-of-the-day meetings are less successful because most salespeople are drained by the day's activities. The last thing they need is another meeting that's going to tax their minds.



Fresh minds are like fresh oranges — you can squeeze more out of them.

Monday or Friday meetings are popular because they either kick off the week or end it. Keep in mind, however, that statutory holidays often fall on these two days. So it's better to schedule your meetings on the first or last *working day* of the week.

First-of-the-week meetings give you a chance to make sure people are on track and on target for a successful (or at least busy) week. End-of-the-week meetings offer the benefit of performing a post-mortem on the week's successes (or failures) as well as setting some priorities for the upcoming week.

Breakfast meetings are becoming more and more popular. Provide a continental breakfast (muffins and coffee) and have it available 15 minutes before the start of the meeting. This way you stand a better chance of getting your people to show up early (or at least on time). Make sure breakfast ends when the meeting starts. No eating during the meeting; it's distracting and potentially messy.

The danger of an early-morning meeting is that it can become open-ended. If a lot of discussion is going on, there's a strong tendency to keep the meeting going past the allotted time. Salespeople are aware of this and will often take advantage of this tendency. The longer they can prolong the meeting, the less time they will have to get out and make cold calls. You can lessen this problem by having an agenda, setting a firm end time, or scheduling late-in-the-day meetings. While not the best time, a sales meeting that starts at 4 p.m. is unlikely to run past 6 p.m. no matter what kind of discussion is going on. In fact, it's often difficult to keep people past 5:30 p.m., particularly on a Friday.

Some managers hold Friday afternoon meetings simply to ensure their people are still on the job. A better approach is to hire people you can trust to do the job the way you want it done.

So what are the best times then? Here they are in order of effectiveness and general preference:

- Early morning, first or last working day of the week (Monday or Friday).
- Other early mornings (Tuesday/Wednesday/Thursday).

- Late afternoons, early in the week (Monday/Tuesday/Wednesday).
- Late afternoon, Thursday.
- Evenings (Monday/Tuesday/Wednesday/Thursday).
- Any lunch time.

The poorest time? Well, the absolutely poorest time is never! Another poor time is late afternoon of the last working day of the week. People want to get the week's work wrapped up and get home to their families. The only way this type of meeting works is if it's a casual, semi-social meeting.

How about evening meetings? These are not very popular but you can ease the pain with a bit of planning. One company I know allows their suppliers to come in and do product training seminars in the evening, providing they supply a snack for the salespeople. These pop-and-pizza sessions are acceptable as long as there aren't too many of them, there's enough advance notice, and they are truly beneficial and informative to the attendees. Hold evening meetings only once or twice a month at the most.

Another type of meeting is the "lunch-and-learn" session. These are single-topic training sessions held over the lunch period. The danger here lies in pulling your salespeople out of the field in the middle of the day. Once in the office, they tend to get stuck there (the sticky-rug syndrome) and are not inclined to make any more outside sales calls. They can always find something to do around the office.

Be careful with early-afternoon meetings. There's an incredible tendency for people to get drowsy around 2 p.m., particularly if they have had a heavy lunch. Your best defense against this wave of drowsiness is to be on a topic where everyone can get involved. This is also a good time to engage in interactive training activities.

LIVENING UP A DULL MEETING

No one ever sets out to have a dull meeting. Unfortunately, too many turn out that way. A key point to keep in mind is that participants will never be more enthusiastic or upbeat than the person in control of the meeting. If you're lively, the group will be lively. If you're quiet, they'll be even more quiet. If you're dull, the group will be even duller! So the next time you find your meeting dragging along at a painful pace, remember that it's your meeting, you're setting the pace, and it's your responsibility to liven it up.



A group never rises above its leader.

Use involvement techniques to liven up the meeting. One way to get people involved is to have them learn about a new product and then present the features and benefits to the rest of the team.

Invite guest speakers or outside trainers to speak to your group from time to time. They bring a change of pace and new points of view to your meetings. In some cases, these people will come free of charge, but remember — you may get what you pay for!

Let other members of the sales team lead some of the meetings. They can often bring new ideas and fresh views to the table. It also allows them to develop their abilities to conduct meetings and improves their abilities to make group presentations. It will also give them a better appreciation for this part of your job.

KEEP MEETINGS ON TRACK AND ON SCHEDULE

One reason why meetings get off track is because they don't have a track to run on in the first place. Here are some keys to keeping your meetings on track and on schedule:

Have a Printed Schedule/Agenda With Allotted Times

Here's a sample agenda for a one-and-a-half-hour meeting:

- 8:30 Opening comment (2-5 minutes)
- 8:35 Good news roundtable (5-10 min.)
- 8:45 Old business (5-10 min.)
 - List the items to be covered
- 8:55 New business (15-25 min.)
 - List of your items to be discussed
 - (This section may also include items that other group members have asked to be put on the agenda.)
- 9:20 Open to the floor (15 min.)
 - Spontaneous items
- 9:35 Training (20 min.)
 - Sales training, new product info, guest speaker, etc.
- 9:55 Close (1-5 min.)
 - Time and place for next meeting
 - Who is responsible to do what and when
 - Thank members for attending
 - End on a positive note
- 10:00 Outta here!

The agenda should be in people's hands or their inbox — electronic or otherwise — before the meeting, preferably the day before. This gives people time to get their minds around the topics to be covered and be better prepared to actively participate in the meeting.

Keep to the Schedule

Beside each item on your copy of the agenda, mark the time it should start. This also lets you know at a glance when the previous item should end. This way you will know when to wind down discussion on a particular topic. If an item has not been completed during the allotted time, reschedule it to the next meeting. However, if the topic is

important and you decide to carry on with it, quickly determine which of the remaining items can be postponed.

For example: In the sample agenda above, the open-to-the-floor item is slated to finish at 9:35. If the group is discussing a particularly important topic, you could drop the training item to gain another 20 minutes of discussion time. On the other hand, if the meeting finishes early, shut it down. The idea is to end your meeting on time or earlier, not stretch it out forever.



Start on Time

There's a tendency to let the last person in the door set the start time for the meeting. I like to start my meetings on time. Latecomers must find out what they missed from one of the other participants after the meeting is over. I usually refuse to go back over material already covered just because someone hasn't the courtesy (or the ability to plan his or her schedule) to show up on time. I've been known to start a six-person meeting with just one other person in the room. The others will soon get the message.

If you want to start your meeting on time, yet don't want latecomers to miss the important parts, start the meeting with a filler. *For example:* Have each person share with the group one good thing that happened to him or her since the last meeting (good news roundtable). Unless you are in the midst of a major recession or other disaster, this technique has the effect of starting on a bit of a high. Make sure the comments stay positive. Don't let it degenerate into a bitching session.

Another way to encourage an on-time start for your meeting is to fine latecomers. A buck or two goes a long way to encouraging promptness and the resulting accumulation of funds can offset the cost of donuts or whatever.

KEEPING CONTROL

It's your meeting and you have the schedule. If a topic is beginning to run on or people are digressing, try summarizing the discussion to see if a conclusion can be reached. If that doesn't work, suggest that the topic be carried over to another meeting where there will be more time available. Use the agenda and your authority to stay on track.

Ensure outside speakers or guests know how much time they have been allotted. Be specific. Give start and end times for their presentations. Some outside speakers or even invited presenters from other departments can fall in love with the sound of their own voices and go on and on and on. Stress the importance of finishing on time. Ask for their cooperation and tell them you will give a five- to 10-minute advance warning.

GETTING INVOLVEMENT

Involvement starts before the meeting. Find out, in advance, what items people want on the agenda. This ensures a certain degree of interest.

Other tips for getting people involved are:

- Rotate the chair position.
- Give others responsibility for various parts of the meeting.
- Assign sales training or product knowledge segments to others.
- Ask someone to take brief notes and make a summary.
- Have quickie contests or quizzes (test their product knowledge).
- Role-play sales presentations (qualifying a typical prospect, handling specific objections, etc.).
- Use case studies (taken from your files).
- Conduct brainstorming activities.
- Have buzz groups where you break the larger group into several smaller ones so there's more involvement.

Remember, you don't have to do all the talking. In fact, it's better if you don't! Get others involved.

HANDLING BAD NEWS

You want your meeting to begin and end on a positive note. In between, however, there will probably be a gamut of emotions and attitudes.

If you have some bad news to impart to the team, do it carefully. Use the sandwich approach — put the bad news between two pieces of good (or at least neutral) news. And be sure to plan what you will say in advance.

If others have bad news they want to talk about — like a lost sale, etc. — ask them to hold their comments until the open-to-the-floor section of the meeting. When it's time to cover the bad news, try to make it a learning experience. By simply asking, "What have we learned from this experience?" you may be able to neutralize a potentially negative atmosphere.

A chronic complainer, on the other hand, should not be allowed to vent at the meeting. His or her negative attitude will have an adverse affect on the others. Take these people off-line and let them vent in private. The spirit of your sales team depends on each person helping one another.

AVOID DUMPING

Some managers use the sales meeting as a dumping ground for their anger and frustration. If things are not going well, dumping on the team is not likely to inspire them to increase performance. It's more likely to have exactly the opposite effect. Think about it. Have you ever felt inspired when someone shouted at you? Most of us walk away intent on getting even, not performing better.

If someone deserves to be dumped on, do it in private. If the entire team deserves to be dumped on, do it one at a time and in private. They'll compare notes about what happened and you'll be respected for not using the situation to personally embarrass them.

TRAINING TIPS

Sales meetings offer an ideal forum for sales and product training sessions. Here are a few tips to get the most from these mini training sessions.

1. Keep them relatively short, 20 to 45 minutes will do.
2. Assign a topic to a salesperson and have the individual learn more about it and then train the others at a future meeting.
3. Get them to practise various sales techniques such as qualifying or handling objections with each other. If they won't practise in the safe environment of the meeting room, they won't do the real thing in front of a prospect.
4. Avoid role-playing unless the group wants it. Most salespeople find role-playing in front of their peers very painful. A better way is to divide the group into pairs and have each pair practise at the same time. That way, the spotlight isn't on any one person. Assign one of the pair to act as a coach to the other person. The coach's job is to help his or her partner fine-tune the skill being practised. Allow two to five minutes before switching roles. After a couple of rounds, switch the pairs so that each person has a new partner to practise with.

A WORD OF CAUTION

I'm not a big fan of the Friday afternoon beer bust/meeting that some companies like to hold. This phenomenon got its start in the late '60s in California and quickly spread across North America. My concerns are three-fold:

1. With the whole subject of drinking and driving becoming a major issue, you may appear corporately irresponsible;
2. By condoning drinking on the job during business hours, you stand the danger of transmitting the wrong message to your employees;
3. If one of your employees has an accident on the way home from such a meeting, you may be held legally and financially responsible.

Managers tell me they limit the drinks at these affairs. That's fine, except you can't limit the number of drinks the person may have after they leave your facilities. You stand the chance of being accused of priming the pump. You don't need the aggravation of a lawsuit, etc. My advice: If you and your team want to quaff a beer or two, do it after hours and off premises.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Close your sales meeting on a high. You want your people leaving in a positive frame of mind. One approach is to wrap up the meeting by asking each person to quickly share with the group one positive thing he or she got from the meeting. If they're not leaving with at least one positive thing or idea, then your meeting isn't worth attending. Don't let that happen.

Plan your closing comments beforehand. Know what point, inspirational message, or thought you want them to walk away with. They will leave feeling pleased about this meeting and looking forward to the next one.

Good luck!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Jeffrey is a sales management consultant and former sales trainer with over 40 year's experience. He's the author of *The Sales Wizard's Secrets of Sales Management*, *The 5-Minute Sales trainer*, 18 ebooks, and over 100 articles on selling and sales management.

Brian provides sales management consulting, coaching, and mentoring to business owners and sales managers. He has had many sales successes (as well as a few spectacular failures) and has learned what works, what doesn't, and why — information he readily shares with others.

Find out how Brian helps companies maximize their sales at **www.Quintarra.com**.

