Reducing Cycle Time in Sales Training Through Role Playing

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Executive Summary
Sales training is a key organizational process used by many firms to develop high quality salespeople into value-adding agents.

Trainers can begin to develop salespeople who add value in the following ways:

- Link the product knowledge gained in training with knowledge of the buying organization to solve buyer-specific problems;
- Incorporate the presentation and interaction skills which enable salespeople to effectively gain information and to develop mutually beneficial, long-term interorganizational relationships, and;
- Use a heightened perception of self-efficacy to attempt and persist with more value-adding sales tasks which can eventually aid buyers.

The competitive nature of today’s business environment dictates that management develop and strategically deploy these value-adding salespeople and, in doing so, generate additional revenue. This goal must be attained by the organization without spending additional time and money.

Accordingly, sales trainers should develop specific training programs that contribute to the development of an efficient, value-adding sales force using fewer of the organization’s resources.

Role play can help measure training effectiveness. Organizations can use a trainee’s performance on role play exercises as a partial predictor of readiness for field selling. Other things being equal, the better the role play performance in training, the faster the trainee moves to the next stage, field selling.

The results of this study suggest cycle time improvements in sales training can be achieved by implementing effectively staged role play exercises. Our results indicate how organizations can save on training by reducing the time it takes to effectively train new salespeople. We also demonstrate that training enhancers can increase the revenue generating potential of these new salespeople. Subjects in a sales training simulation study have been shown to achieve higher levels of desired outcomes of role play exercises. These treatments reduce the number of remedial role plays that must be used before the trainees achieve desired levels of skills, knowledge, and attitude.

The overall effect is that sales training cycle time has been reduced.

Introduction
The competitive nature of today’s business environment dictates that management develop and strategically deploy salespeople who can generate more revenue, without increasing use of the organization’s time and
money. Accordingly, sales trainers are concerned with creating training programs that contribute to the development of an effective sales force using fewer of the organization’s resources. Cycle time research is concerned with decreasing the time it takes to perform organizational processes and/or changing processes in a way that will reduce cost and/or increase customer satisfaction. At its best, cycle time research can help position companies to achieve organizational objectives using fewer resources. The objective of this article is to offer trainers suggestions that can reduce sales training cycle time and improve trainee performance. These suggestions, in turn, can help trainers accomplish organizational goals which focus on doing more with less. We begin by offering new ideas on how to decrease sales training cycle time while simultaneously increasing the quality of the training output in one area—role play. In addition, we offer evidence that supports the value of these training ideas based on how trainees have responded to them in a training simulation exercise.

First, we develop and briefly discuss a Sales Cycle Time Chain to identify the stages required to develop an effective sales force that eventually contributes to increased organizational profits. We do so to identify the potential areas where improved sales training can result in a decrease in cycle time. We then discuss the potential impact of an important sales training method, role play, on the remainder of the Sales Cycle Time Chain. Our discussion includes a description of how training enhancers can be used to overcome some of the limitations of role play. Finally, we describe and report the results of a research project that gives tangible evidence about the value of the suggestions we make to enhance sales training. And as the following results will show, sales trainers can begin to develop more efficient training programs that lead to quicker development of effective salespeople. Previously, sales training researchers have almost exclusively concentrated on soliciting opinions from sales trainers about current

![Figure 1: Sales Cycle Time](image-url)
training practices. These researchers have produced volumes of information about which training methods are most often used and which of these methods are perceived as most effective. However, they report little concrete information that would offer trainers new ideas about improving training programs through different or improved techniques. In our research, we narrow our focus by applying the cycle time research paradigm to the organization’s sales training effort to evaluate the usefulness of our proposed training.

Training and the Sales Cycle Time Chain
A sales force may contribute to the organization’s profits in two ways: 1) by generating revenue and 2) by reducing the expense incurred in doing so. Organizations practicing the marketing concept achieve both of these objectives by concentrating on building profitable relationships with customers. The Sales Cycle Time Chain (see Figure 1) incorporates the idea that the link with customers is the key to profits. It also identifies the nature of interconnecting processes that lead to an increase in the organization’s profits through building positive selling relationships.

Each interconnecting link in the Sales Cycle Time Chain has its own cycle time. Organizations should ensure that new salespeople efficiently progress through each link in the chain. The more efficiently the organization guides the sales force through each cycle and through this chain overall, the higher the profits returned by the sales force (both through revenue generation and expense reduction). Also, because of the overlapping nature of this chain, gains forged early in the chain impact positively on the total cycle time.

The management of customer-oriented organizations undoubtedly believe that training leads to an increase in organizational profits through the development of mutually-profitable relationships. The assumptions of the Sales Cycle Time Chain are consistent with this belief.

Many organizations use training as the entry point into the Sales Cycle Time Chain. These organizations begin with training methods, such as lecturing, videotaped instruction, case studies, and role play, which serve as the building blocks in the development of a total training program. The training program, in turn, is designed to develop new salespeople into contributing members of an effective sales force. These effective salespeople individually will contribute to this development and become part of an effective sales force. These individuals will learn how to develop efficient selling cycles with individual customers, which in turn, lead to profitable relationships with customers. Profits hinge on the sales force achieving desired efficiency levels without compromising the value added to the customer relationship. Thus, profits accruing to both firms increase.
as does the mutual commitment to the relationship.

Sales Training and Role Play
In this study, we narrow our focus to the first link in the Sales Cycle Time Chain to investigate the impact of one training method—role play—and its impact on the remainder of the chain. The goal of role play is to increase the trainees’ current levels of selling knowledge, increase their sales skills, and enhance their beliefs in their ability to sell. Role play focuses attention on the interaction between a buyer and a seller. In a training setting, trainees imagine they are playing the role of a salesperson interacting with a prospective buyer. Role play is designed to help new salespeople learn new behaviors and better take on the actual role of a salesperson. Sales trainees can try new behaviors and practice being a salesperson in a controlled environment before they use them in a “live” setting. Role play eases new salespeople into this unfamiliar role.

Role play is consistently rated by sales trainers as the most effective form of sales training. Perhaps it is rated as most effective because it simulates expected on-the-job situations and coerces trainees to translate learning into doing. Effectiveness increases considerably when trainers ensure that the role play is conducted in a friendly, positive atmosphere. This lessens the trainees’ fears of failure and allows them the best chance of experiencing success in their role plays. This success contributes to salespeople’s confidence in their own selling abilities.

Since role play is consistently rated as the most effective training method, it is among the most frequently used tools. As such, any demonstrated improvements in the use of role play will certainly aid most organizations’ training programs. Also, role play can serve as a training effectiveness measure: organizations can use a trainee’s performance on role play exercises as a partial predictor of readiness for field selling. Accordingly, role play can serve as an indicator of training cycle time. That is, the better the role play performance in training, the faster the trainee will move through to the next step in the Sales Cycle Time Chain.

Role Play Training Enhancers
Despite the many benefits gained from using role play, there are also some drawbacks that potentially lengthen training cycle time. First, role plays are staged and sometimes over-dramatized. The trainee must play an unfamiliar part and draw upon new experiences to perform the role adequately. As such, trainees may have problems either getting into or stepping out of character during the role play.

Other difficulties with role play are related to this problem of remaining in character. First, trainers may fail to give the trainee sufficient information about the “drama” in which he or she is about to appear. Also, trainees may have no prior experiences to draw upon that would help them play the role of the seller. This possibility severely limits the range of behaviors trainees are able to portray.

When the problems identified with role play occur, the cycle time to achieve satisfactory
role play results is lengthened. Therefore, several different role plays may be required to achieve the desired effects. Cycle time reductions can occur if organizations properly prepare trainees for role play rather than simply increasing the number of role plays.

To address these problems, we developed two different role play enhancing videotapes to be shown to sales trainees prior to their participation in role plays. To overcome the problem of new sales trainees not having any experiences to draw upon when trying to play a seller, we developed a “dialoguing” videotape. This videotape shows a salesperson demonstrating many of the same selling behaviors the trainees will perform later. The idea behind this concept of modeling is that trainees can learn vicariously through observation. “Modeling, the behavioral scientists tell us with rare accord, is the chief way people learn,” according to Tom Peters’ *Thriving on Chaos* (1987). It has also been identified by Wetherbe (1995) as a key point of leverage for reducing cycle time. Many training organizations currently use videotapes to show trainees how to make sales calls. Unfortunately, many of these videotapes depict selling behaviors that are either too advanced or too elementary to inspire appropriate imitation. We developed the dialoguing videotape for trainees with no sales training or selling experience. As such, it was consciously designed to model selling skills at the level a new salesperson could reasonably be expected to imitate.

Many trainees feel a sense of apprehension when asked to role play. This fact results in trainees being unable to get into the selling character. To overcome this problem, we developed a “mentoring” videotape. This videotape was designed to help trainees overcome their apprehension, get into character, and take their role more seriously. This tape also introduces the new

![Figure 2: Research Overview](image-url)
salesperson to a fictitious sales mentor. The mentor describes various aspects of the job and their feelings about the start of their sales career in a way that encourages role players to “get into” the seller role. A narrator then asks the trainees to “act out” certain intangible goals of the sales call (such as developing trust) through their behavior so that the buyer perceives those intentions. This fact also requires the trainees to use their imaginations and expand their range of potential selling behaviors.

These videotaped enhancers do not address all of the problems of role play. However, in combination, both videotapes are designed to overcome the deficiencies of viewing just the single dialoguing or mentoring videotapes. Through this combination, trainees vicariously learn the sales behaviors necessary to perform the role play effectively while also assuming the character to be portrayed in the role play better.

Research Overview
To evaluate the training ideas we incorporated in the videotaped role play enhancers, university students were used as training participants, hereafter referred to as “trainees”. One hundred student trainees were chosen from a junior-level marketing class composed primarily of business majors. To provide a more stringent test of the two training enhancers and to avoid having results skewed by the trainees’ prior training or knowledge of selling, these students were selected to become trainees based on their lack of experience with sales training or selling. Also, students were given cash performance incentives to stimulate their effort in the training exercise. The top two trainees in each group were given a $50 award. From a total pool of one hundred trainees, twenty-five were randomly assigned to each of the four groups: control, dialoguing, mentoring, and combination. Training is designed to affect three broad areas in the trainee: trainee knowledge, skills, and attitudes. We chose four “success indicators” encompassing these three broad areas: knowledge acquisition, interaction skills, presentation skills, and self-efficacy to determine the effectiveness of the training enhancers (Figure 2).

Knowledge acquisition was defined as the ability to recall specific information correctly after exposure to a larger set of information. We defined interaction skills as the ability to effectively associate with a buyer. Presentation skills were the trainee’s ability to present a product, service, and/or themselves in an effective manner. Self-efficacy is the trainee’s assessment of their ability to perform the behavior(s) needed to successfully complete the sales task.

In this experiment, the trainees role played using interactive video technology (IVT). This technology combines a personal computer, a laser disc, and a video camera so a simulated selling situation can be
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Figure 3: Knowledge Acquisition Scores

Figure 4: Sales Presentation Scores
provided. Video images are stored on a laser disc and are played via the computer screen. This system is “interactive” in that users may use a touch screen on the computer monitor to “signal” their intended responses in a sales simulation. The command unit then pulls a pre-recorded video image from the laser disc and plays a pre-selected response via the computer monitor. The user sees this response, reacts according to the situation, and is recorded on the video tape responding in a role play manner. This process of the user signaling an intended response, responding on camera, and watching the response of the video image on the computer monitor continues until the sales call is completed. A controlling unit coordinates the electronic flows through the personal computer, the laser disc, and the video recording system. This process takes approximately 30 minutes for the trainee to complete. The final product is a videotape recording of the user (“seller”) and the video image (“buyer”) participating in a “real time” role play. Each videotape lasts about ten minutes. Members of the control group were given complete, written directions about how to complete the role play training exercise using IVT. Also, they were given oral background information about the products and services they were to represent and the goal of their particular sales interaction. This group is analogous to organizations that do not offer training to new salespeople and it serves as a baseline in evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed training ideas.

The dialoguing group was shown the sales dialogue videotape three to seven days before they were to role play on IVT. At the conclusion of the video, the trainees were told their role play would be similar to the one they had witnessed on the video and to rehearse in their mind the role play in advance of their IVT role play date. When arriving for their appointment to complete the IVT role play, the trainees were given the same instructions that the control group received. In addition, they were told to recall the videotape and given time to rehearse mentally the role play before using the IVT.

The mentoring group was shown the appropriate videotape just prior to their IVT role play. After watching this video, the trainees were then given the same instructions as the control group and asked to role play using IVT.

In the combination group, members were shown the dialoguing videotape three to seven days prior to IVT role play and given the same instructions as the dialoguing group. At the time of their role play they were told (just as with the dialoguing group) to rehearse mentally one last time. Then, just prior to role playing, they were shown the mentoring videotape to help them take their role more seriously and better perform their role. Finally, the combination group members were given the same role play instructions as the control group.

Results
In determining the effectiveness of the videotapes on the trainees, data were
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**Figure 5: Sales Interaction Scores**

**Figure 6: Self-Efficacy Scores**
collected regarding the four aforementioned success indicators: knowledge acquisition, sales interaction skills, sales presentation skills, and self-efficacy. Each of these areas was evaluated individually and collectively. Knowledge acquisition was measured by giving each trainee a multiple-choice questionnaire which asked them to answer fact-based questions about the information supplied in the IVT role play. The group means reported in Figure 3 are calculated from the number of questions correctly answered by the trainee. As indicated in Figure 3, the combination group performed best. On average, each trainee in the combination group correctly answered 1.5 more questions correctly than did the baseline control group.

Sales presentation skills were measured by giving three expert judges an evaluation tool designed to measure the effectiveness the trainees exhibited in presenting themselves and their product and service. The judges, acting separately and without prior knowledge of the trainees’ group memberships, viewed a videotape of the role play and scored items on a scale from 1 (least favorable) to 7 (most favorable). The evaluators based their assessment on their level of agreement with individual statements about the role play performance. The group means reported in Figure 4 represent the summated score for each of the trainee’s presentation skills. As indicated, the combination group had the highest mean for presentation skills. The mean score for the combination group was 5.3 (based on 11 items). This figure represented an average improvement of 1.7 rating points on each individual item over the
control group, whose average rating was 3.6 per item. The improvement moved the individual per-item average from an unfavorable position (below 4) to a favorable position (above 4).

Interaction skills of the trainees were measured by the same three expert judges in the same manner as that of the presentation skills. These expert judges evaluated the trainees’ exhibited abilities to interact effectively with the IVT “buyer.” As shown in Figure 5, the average per-item score for the combination group in the sales interaction skill area was 5.1 (based on 15 items). This figure represented an average per item improvement of 1.4 rating points over the control group average rating of 3.7. Again, this improvement moved the individual average from an unfavorable position to a favorable position.

Trainees’ self-efficacy was measured on the level of improvement after completing the role play exercise. Before the trainees knew they would be selected to participate in this study, we gave them a survey that determined their level of self-confidence in their abilities to perform all of the tasks associated with the role play. This definition amounts to their anticipated performance level. Three to seven days after the trainees completed the role play exercise, they answered the same survey. The reported group means (see Figure 6) represent the average total improvement in self-efficacy scores resulting from the role play exercise. The combination group again showed the most improved scores. It is interesting to note that the control group showed the second best improvement average. Perhaps this fact is due to this group having had no real performance expectations or behavior guidelines as did the mentoring and dialoguing groups. Their improvement was not based on any tangible measure, but conceivably based solely on an incorrect perception of the level of quality of their performance.

Combined training outcome scores (reported in Figure 7) were derived by weighting each success indicator equally and combining each of the resulting four success indicator scores into one total score. Again, the combination group outscored each of the other groups. Comparing its improvement to the baseline control group, it appears that the increases attributed to each training enhancer represented a unique contribution to performance rather than an overlapping one. The weighted average score for the mentoring group was 0.99 rating points higher than the control group. The weighted average score for the dialoguing group was 1.82 rating points higher than the control group. The combination group had a weighted average score 3.27 rating points higher than the control group. The combined improvement, when taken separately (dialoguing plus mentoring) was 2.81 rating points higher than the control group. Roughly 14 percent of the improvement (0.46) was left unexplained. This suggests that when both training enhancers are used some synergistic effect is achieved.

Discussion and Conclusion

Role play enhancers can shorten the cycle time to effective role play (a critical part of
the first link—achieving the desired training method effect). Collectively, the enhancers efficiently demonstrate selling behaviors easily duplicated at the sales trainee entry level. Also, these enhancers help put role players at ease so they are better able to acquire the information presented in the role play exercise while simultaneously improving performance. The increased performance levels and knowledge gains undoubtedly contributed to the increases shown in the trainees’ confidence in their abilities to perform these sales behaviors in the future (self-efficacy).

The results indicate that sales trainers should consider changing their approach to preparing new trainees for role play. Results from the combination group showed that each of the two training enhancers contributed to performance in unique ways rather than making an overlapping contribution. Given that 14 percent of the improvement was left unexplained, there may be a positive interaction effect between the two enhancers. This finding suggests to trainers that using both training enhancers would be beneficial for training new salespeople.

The use of the ideas contained in the dialoguing video are not new. Many organizations already use techniques contained in this enhancer. However, organizations must exercise caution when developing training aids incorporating the ideas contained in the dialoguing group. The sales dialogue modeled for new trainees should be at a level that the trainee can duplicate. A sales dialogue that is either too elementary or too advanced will provide little learning to a new trainee.

The key finding from this study is the incorporation of the ideas contained in the mentoring group. While the dialoguing videotape addresses knowledge of specific selling behaviors, the mentoring videotape addresses the actual performance of these behaviors. The mentoring videotape was conceived and developed to change the trainees’ states of mind about their role play performances. It was designed to facilitate the trainees’ identification with the sales mentor and allow them to more quickly get into the character they are to play. The mentoring videotape appears to stimulate the imagination of the trainees. The trainees are invited to play the role as they think their mentor would and to demonstrate, through their behavior, their desire to develop trusting, mutually beneficial relationships.

One caveat of this study is its relatively limited scope. This study focuses on only one training method; it was not done within the context of a complete sales training program and it was not conducted on “real” sales trainees. Nonetheless, the potential benefits accruing from this study may outweigh these drawbacks. By isolating one popular training method, we increased our knowledge of how to stage role plays in sales training programs.

The research results show cycle time reductions in training new salespeople can be achieved using the suggestions we offer. When looking at the new salesperson training process, there are separate but overlapping cycle time issues that eventually
contribute to increased organizational profits (see Sales Cycle Time Chain in Figure 1).
Since use of the enhancers shorten the cycle time associated with the first link in the process, the cycle time associated with each of the ensuing links in the chain is shortened. In addition, the output from this process, the effectively trained salesperson, is improved. This improvement potentially can lead to a cycle time reduction in the ensuing links in the chain.
This study developed a set of role play training enhancers and empirically evaluate their effectiveness. The findings show that those trainees who were given information about both the selling behavior and the seller’s character to be played later in the role play experienced higher levels of the desired role play outcomes.
This study indicates that sales trainers should reconsider their approach to role play preparation, and provide trainees with the knowledge of which specific selling behaviors to use and with the knowledge of the character they are to play. By doing so, trainees can be better guided through the training process thereby increasing the organization’s return on their investment in sales training.
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