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A Hands-On Guide for Sales Managers

Mike Eastwood of
Golf Ventures West



Training Yields Results

How one company used training and testing to improve sales and increase profits

The Problem

Golf Ventures West (GVW) is a four-year-old division of Meadowbrook Golf that sells equipment to care for turf, mostly on golf courses, in southern California, Nevada, and Arizona. "We're living the dream," jokes president Mike Eastwood. He has 15 outside salespeople who call on customers, plus several sales managers, all working out of six locations in the US southwest. The reps are well paid, with base salaries from \$55,000 to \$75,000. Add in commission, and a top rep can make up to \$200,000 annually.

Sales range from \$300 for a trimmer all the way to \$70,000 for a lawn mower. Reps average from \$1.5 million to \$2.5 million per year in sales. These reps are highly experienced in the turf care industry, some with more than 30 years' experience, either with well-known equipment manufacturers or as lawn supervisors themselves. Customers count on GVW reps to advise them on turf problems and recommend solutions. Eastwood wants to hold on to these highly seasoned salespeople. "It takes six months to a year to get a new guy up to speed. This is a relationship business – the customers have to know you and trust you."

Meadowbrook CEO Ron Jackson wanted fast and profitable growth when he established GVW in 2004, so he recommended that Eastwood use Predictive Index Worldwide's (PI) test to profile all his employees. Eastwood became an immediate believer. "I

had used other programs, but they took a long time and people got frustrated. This was very quick."

Best of all, PI was precise. Eastwood had all GVW employees take the PI assessment and found it highly accurate. "Some employees could not get details, and PI had accurately assessed that they were not good at details. Others were bad on the phone, and PI said they did not like talking to people. Every time we hired a person without a good PI, we have had issues or had to let them go."

Finding the Solution

In late 2006, Mike Stewart, president of Predictive Index Arizona, came to Eastwood with a new tool, the Selling Skills Assessment Tool (SSAT). Unlike the PI assessment of personality, SSAT looks for five specific skills in salespeople: opening, investigating, presenting, confirming (closing), and following up. Reps are given five scenarios under each skill, asked to respond with the right choices, and scored from 0 to 100.

GVW reps understood turf superbly, but they did not necessarily know sales. Even highly experienced reps and sales managers scored only from the 40s to the 60s on the SSAT. Eastwood himself had the highest score, in the 80s. "My weakness was presentation. I thought I was good at presentation because I planned what I would say, but I didn't do it." And Eastwood figured his



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reps and sales managers should know much more about sales than their president did. "My eyes opened," he says.

The most common weaknesses in the sales force were in the investigation step. "Typically, the sales reps were good at presentation. And as the commissions got nearer, they were strong at closing," Stewart says. "They had very strong product knowledge. They were weed experts. But instead of asking the customers what they cared about - for example, budgets - they went right into the presentation."

"Opening is not a challenge for us," Eastwood says. "We can introduce new reps to customers. But our guys would ask them what they needed, sell it to them, say thanks, and be out the door quickly. They were not learning about the customers' other needs."

Making It Work

The next step was another new PI tool, a class in customer-focused selling (CFS). Stewart conducted the two-day class, which is built around the five skills tested in the SSAT. "I was aware of the sales reps' individual styles, and I took them through their scores," he says. All GVW reps took the class, along with the company president himself. "It was the best two-day class I ever had," Eastwood remembers.

Almost all the reps were immediately responsive. One rep was very experienced and scientific about turf care. "He was a tough hombre, but if you took a technical problem to him, he knew the answer," Stewart remembers. "He sat in the class with his arms crossed. Then he figured, what the hell, I'll try it. He started investigating better than he ever did before."

Eastwood continues to use the language of CFS to help reps remember where they are in the sales cycle. "I made cheat cards they could put on their vehicle visors, so they can look at it every morning," he says. "Most of them say they look at it at least once a week."

GVW now uses the SSAT before hiring news sales reps. "Once we get down to two or three candidates and they are all evenly matched, we give them the SSAT," Eastwood says. "It can cost \$30,000 to \$50,000 to train a new sales rep, not counting lost business. The SSAT costs only \$150 to \$200."

Results

"This has been very successful. Our guys are asking more questions than they were before," Eastwood says. He estimates that the CFS class paid for itself in just two weeks. His most experienced rep, who had scored a disappointing 52 on the SSAT, soon closed a \$40,000 deal with a customer who had been buying from a competitor for 10 years. "He enjoyed the way the selling process peeled back the customer's reservations and opened the door for the sale. This salesperson has continued to significantly increase his revenue over the previous year."

An underperforming rep was moved to a new territory after CFS training. "The results were amazing. He sold more in four months in his new territory than in a year in his original area," Eastwood says.

"I have been using the tools from the CFS class in my new territory, and they have helped me big time," the rep says. "The biggest tip I received from the class was to ask broader questions up front to help determine the needs of the customer." - HENRY CANADAY

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