

Special Report

How To Make Sure Your *Next* National Sales Meeting Is Better Than Your Last One

Prepared by

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Introduction

The purpose of this Special Report is to share my observations and experiences concerning National Sales Meetings. I'm sending this Special Report to sales managers and salespeople. My hope and expectations are that sales managers will benefit now sales representatives who become sales managers will benefit in the future.

This is the time of year when senior corporate sales executives gather around conference tables to plan National Sales Meetings for the first quarter. Most managers enjoy participating in this process. What's not to enjoy? Your meeting is probably scheduled at a resort, you have a new message to get out to your salespeople, and everyone is excited about the prospects for the New Year.

Planning these national sales meetings has become a ritual in many organizations. In many cases, some of the same people do the same planning year after year after year. These meetings oftentimes are built with silos in mind. There is a presidential silo, a vice president silo, a marketing silo, a sales silo, a communications silo, a product silo, a sales representative silo - well you get the picture.

How Do Most Sales Meetings Get Planned?

Some of this is very obvious. What follows is a list of decisions that must be made during the planning process. Here they are:

- 1) The date
- 2) The city
- 3) The hotel/resort
- 4) The meeting "Theme"
- 5) The meeting objectives
- 6) The budget
- 7) The transportation

- 8) The agenda
- 9) The speakers
- 10) The giveaways
- 11) The golf outing/tennis outing/shopping outing

This is but a small list of priorities that sales executives must deal with to produce a well-run National Sales Meeting. Oftentimes, sales managers are too busy and too stressed out to be creative when it comes to planning these meetings. For example, I can't tell you how many National Sales Meetings adopt a "Theme" like "Go For The Gold" – whenever the Olympics are scheduled.

The meeting objectives, if you really analyze them, are nothing more than buttered Melba toast.

The agenda is built like a marathon - long and grueling.

The speakers are always allocated less time than they really need. So they end up talking faster and showing more PowerPoint slides.

The giveaways are always imaginative and emblazoned with corporate logos i.e. tote bags, baseball caps, golf shirts, coffee mugs and water bottles. Occasionally, you'll even get a beach towel thrown in.

What's Wrong With Most Sales Meetings?

That depends on whom you ask. If you ask midlevel managers they'll tell you they need to have more time in front of the sales reps to get their message across. If you ask senior level managers they often get frustrated because there is so much to do and so little time to do it. That's why, "as time goes by" the agenda gets longer. If you ask salespeople you get a different response. Here's a group that's overwhelmed when they arrive at the National Sales Meeting and by the time they leave they're ready for a decompression chamber.

Here's a list of my observations of what's wrong with some sales meetings:

- a) Meeting objectives that are not clearly defined
- b) The agenda is too long and tries to accomplish too much
- c) It's been said the people who talk the most learn the most at these meetings. If that's the case, management is learning a great deal.

- d) A lot of time is spent on city and site selection. Based on my own experiences very little time is spent on the room selection. I've worked in rooms too big, too small, too wide, too close to the kitchen, too hot, too cold, too close to construction areas and the list goes on.
- e) Too many PowerPoint slides and too many points on each of these PowerPoint slides.
- f) Sit-down lunches after long sit-down morning sessions.
- g) With an aim to please in mind, exotic desserts are served at lunch and when combined with monotone afternoon speakers, it creates an impossible learning situation.
- h) Meetings that are boring and have no fun scheduled because there is too much work to be done.
- i) Presenters who don't start/end on time.
- j) Presenters who seem more connected to their material than their audience.
- k) Presenters who haven't practiced what they're preaching before they get up to preach it.
- l) Meetings that begin with "the state of the numbers."

And I'm sure, if you let your imagination run wild, you could add your own ideas to this list.

What's The Purpose Of A National Sales Meeting?

Here are four simple yet powerful reasons why you want to have a National Sales Meeting:

1. To inform - what's new, what's changing, and what do your salespeople need to know?
2. To motivate - whether this year has been good or bad you want to motivate them to do even better next year.
3. To educate - what do your salespeople need to know to help them improve their personal productivity and selling results.
4. To train - products are "what" salespeople sell. Sales Training covers "how"

they should go about doing that.

5. To solicit feedback - these meetings provide a great opportunity to listen to what your salespeople have on their minds.

Characteristics Of Good Sales Meetings

If you want to plan a really good sales meeting - keep these things in mind. Your meeting objectives should be crystal clear. During the last 14 years I've conducted over 168 sales management workshops, which represents approximately 4200 sales managers. In each of the workshops I do a breakout session and ask each group, working together as a team to plan a one-day Sales Meeting agenda. The very first step in this exercise requires the managers to write down their Sales Meeting objectives.

In these 14 years there's only been one group out of the 168 groups I've worked with that has completed the exercise with a satisfactory and specific meeting objective. Meeting objectives run the gamut from introducing new products, new product launches, team building, sales training, motivation, competitive intelligence, and whatever else you can think of. Now, these objectives are fine as long as they are not your only Sales Meeting objectives. Here's why - they're too general and impossible to quantify.

When you begin planning your next sales meeting - start with the end of your meeting in mind. Imagine at the end of your National Sales Meeting, several interns will ask each of your salespeople, as they're leaving the meeting, to describe in detail what they specifically took away from your meeting. How would you want your salespeople to respond? Your answer becomes your meeting objective(s). Imagine the insanity that occurs when you have four specific objectives in mind you want your salespeople to take away and when asked, your salespeople don't take away the same four objectives.

When this happens nothing happens and that's never what you want to happen!

By focusing on the end of the meeting and the outcomes you want to achieve - your planning sessions will become more effective and your National Sales Meetings will be even more productive and more profitable for your organization.

Here are some thoughts I have on the subject of National Sales Meetings

Impossible - strike the word from everyone's dictionary, especially the one's belonging to senior management.

Illuminate - focus on new ideas, new technologies, new attitudes, and new products that your salespeople can take from your Sales Meetings.

Inspiration - if ever there was a day or two in every year when the focus ought to be on inspiring the entire organization, your National Sales Meeting is the time to do it.

Incompetent - incompetent people are drag on the entire organization. People who don't measure up shouldn't be able to show up. (Please don't misinterpret this point. I'm referring specifically to people in organizations that haven't made their sales plan in years. I'm referring to general office staff who haven't made a significant contribution in years.)

Impact - what can you do at your National Sales Meetings to create a lasting impact throughout the coming year?

Identify - the product, the market, the customer growth opportunities for your business. Give your salespeople the tools they need to be tops in the markets you serve. I suspect senior management would become more creative, and imaginative, innovative, and decisive if the market share for all businesses (they ran) was etched on the tombstones of all CEOs and presidents. Imagine your epitaph reading, "He was a great guy, a good family man, but only had 7 percent market share."

Impatience - when it comes to sales and selling results I believe we ought to become more impatient. Too many people lack a sense of urgency, are easily distracted, and are more inclined to let things happen instead of making things happen.

Idea generators - think about devoting additional time at your next National Sales Meeting to exchange thoughts, words, and ideas about the future of your customers and your business. Since everyone has to eat, dedicate one meal for a table discussion about a certain topic. Ask each table to select a note-taker and after the luncheon collect all the input. If you have less than 100 salespeople you can pass around a hand held microphone, to each table, to share the best ideas. If the group is too large, hire a temp to consolidate all the notes and be sure to send copies to all your salespeople.

Impenetrable accounts - every company would benefit substantially by targeting the 100 most impenetrable accounts you have and set aside time to get your best minds thinking creatively about how to break-through.

Inculcate - corporate values, mission and purpose, and priorities for the coming quarter and for the upcoming year. Don't ever miss the opportunity at your National Sales Meeting to reinforce these key concepts.

Establish a balance between product training and sales training.

It's absolutely amazing to me to look at a National Sales Meeting agenda and see how little time is devoted to the sharpening of selling skills. Marketing managers and product managers will take days describing new product features, advantages, applications, customer demographics, competitive analysis and so forth.

A colossal assumption and a big mistake is that salespeople don't need sales training because that's what they do. Too many people, especially senior sales executives, confuse experience with training. There's a huge difference. I've observed salespeople with 20 plus years experience who are struggling in today's environment. They're being asked to increase market share, boost profitability, and sell new products using selling skills that are antiquated.

You can preserve valuable Selling Skill training time when you deliver product training using on-line learning and (WBT) web based training programs. Check out <http://www.knowledgeanywhere.com> to see how it works.

Here's a simple exercise:

1. Calculate in minutes your total net sales meeting time. To do this, eliminates all breaks and lunches. Calculate net product training time and divide that by overall net sales meeting time. This will give you the percent of your total meeting time devoted to product training. Next calculate net selling skills training (not to be confused with product training) and divide that by overall net sales meeting time. Do this for every meeting to make sure you temper your sales expectations with a balanced training program.

Special Note: just a short reminder when doing sales forecasting for new products. Never, never, never, base a sales forecast on how many units one sales rep can sell multiplied by the total number of sales reps you have because it never works out that way. A more professional sales forecast will assume 80 percent of new product sales coming from 20 percent of the sales force. Trust me (The Pareto Rule – 80/20) works.

How will you prepare your sales team for your National Sales Meeting?

This is a great question to consider if you haven't given it much thought before. Here are a few suggestions. Send out the meeting agenda 30 days prior to the meeting. It says something about management when you do that. When you don't do that it says something else. Tell people what they need to bring i.e. a calculator, a computer, a day-timer etc.

When you give your salespeople pre-meeting assignments, you have them engaged before they arrive. For example, if you're planning to introduce and launch a new product - you could ask each sales rep to come to the National Sales Meeting with a list of 5 target accounts and 5 open ended questions they plan to use to uncover needs for these new products. I suggest you get this information prior to the sales meeting in order to get a measure of their strategic thinking.

How are you planning to reinforce all the key ideas presented at your National Sales Meeting?

This is relatively easy. You can do any one or a combination of the following.

1. Send an e-mail five days after the meeting outlining key points and desired action steps.
2. Within thirty days after the meeting arrange regional conference calls to discuss what's working and what's not working.
3. Consider purchasing a good book that complements specific actions you want your salespeople to take.
4. Ditto No. 3 with audiocassette tapes. Most companies don't realize their salespeople are spending two or more hours a day in cars (500 plus hours a year) that creates an incredible opportunity to turn cars into classrooms, for at least part of the time. TIP – several of my clients have taken the initiative to ban all cell phone calls while driving because of the potential risk and liability involved. For information about my Tape Album/CD visit <http://www.meisenheimer.com/surefire>
5. Sales managers should increase their field travel following every National Sales Meeting in order to reinforce the major priorities and action steps for the organization.
6. **PLEASE NOTE THIS ONE:** at the end of every sales training seminar and workshop that I do I spend a few minutes showing salespeople how they can profit from a seminar. Here's what I suggest they do:
 - => On a blank sheet of paper list all the keeper ideas from the seminar/workshop. To do this you'll need to review all notes.
 - => Using numbers prioritize the entire list.
 - => Starting with your No. 1 priority assign dates to every item.

=> Enter all dates on your electronic calendar so they pop up as an action item on the appropriate date.

=> Managers should request copies in order to provide the proper reinforcement to their respective sales teams.

Too many people leave too many meetings, with too many good intentions. Good intentions don't count if they don't get done. What does count is what gets applied and used in the individual sales territories.

The single most important thing senior management can do following a National Sales Meeting is to insist that all sales managers dedicate an increased percentage of their time to infield sales rep coaching. A field sales manager who's not in the field is a desk jockey. Coaching salespeople is a field sales manager's No. 1 priority. Also, keep in mind that anyone can be a mediocre coach. It takes extensive training and practice to become an effective coach. Senior managers generally allocate time for their managers to get together before and after their National Sales Meetings. You can jump ahead of your competition when you put the subject of coaching on the Manager's Meeting agenda – routinely.

Good coaches always do three things. First, they listen to everything that's said throughout a sales call. Second, they observe everything including nonverbal gestures, facial expressions, and the immediate environment that they are working in. Finally, good coaches ask good questions. They understand it's important to get their sales representatives to figure things out for themselves. Good sales managers also understand one of their primary roles is to be a teacher. To be an effective teacher you have to be an inquisitive student.

Okay, so you're committed to sales training - but who should do it?

There are three key sources you can rely on to do professional selling skills training:

Line managers - they are an excellent and logical choice. They know best what their salespeople need. As a sales manager they know the business and should be able to maintain control throughout the training process. One disadvantage is that some are great in the field and not so effective teaching in the classroom. Still, line managers should be involved in doing some of the training.

Staff managers - if your company is large enough you may have sales trainers in-house. Most in-house sales trainers will handle all of the sales training details including the delivery and evaluation of the program. Occasionally, if the staff

trainer doesn't have field sales experience, a veteran sales force is likely to take advantage of the trainer. Once again, however, if you have access to an in-house staff trainer I suggest you use him.

Outside consultants/trainers - if you have a budget you can hire people like me. A good sales trainer will prepare and deliver a sales training program based on your specific needs. As an example, I have been doing sales training for the last 14 years and I have never given the same presentation twice. The biggest disadvantage to bringing somebody in from the outside can be the additional investment you'll need to make. You'll feel better about the investment when you divide the total investment (of the sales training) by the number of salespeople and sales managers going through the program.

Wait a minute. I'm a consultant and sales trainer. Please call **(800) 266-1268** if you want to discuss your next sales meeting and to learn about the new sales training programs I have developed. Here's what several salespeople, from four different organizations said about my training programs:

"I've learned more in this class than I have in eight years of selling."

Michelle Erickson

"With 17 years of sales experience this is the best nuts and bolts sales training I have ever had."

Lynn Peterson

"I've been in sales for 15 years and I can't believe the things I learned today that I can use tomorrow."

Mark Goldring

"Thanks to Jim, I got more ideas than Thomas Edison ever had!"

Don Johnson

Which source is the best source? My answer may surprise you! I believe the best source is a combination of all three. Yet too often, senior management will fall permanently in love with one source. My recommendation, regardless of talents and results, is to mix it up periodically.

One more thing on the subject related to sales trainers. I think it's incredible, when you think about it, that senior management will book and reserve the hotel and airlines six to nine months prior to the scheduled meeting date. Yet it's not unusual for me to get calls about doing sales training for an upcoming National Sales Meeting 30 days prior to the meeting. Every year it seems I have to take a

pass on six to eight National Sales Meetings because of a scheduling conflict that probably would not have been an issue if the dates were confirmed 90-180 days before the scheduled meeting.

21 ways to make every National Sales Meeting better than your last one.

1. Focused National Sales Meeting objectives - quantitative and qualitative work best.
2. Written agenda - sent to salespeople 30 days prior to the meeting.
3. All presenters should be evaluated. BIG TIP - all presenters should be asked to identify how many key points they want the sales organization to take away from their presentation. All presenters should be told that a quiz would be given after each presentation asking salespeople to list the key points from that presentation. For example, a product manager has a 30 minute presentation. He says he wants the sales organization to take away three key points and he gives you these three key points prior to his presentation. At the end of his presentation you pass out an evaluation sheet asking your salespeople to list the three key points from the product manager's presentation. This will have a huge impact on the quality of all presentations.
4. Music - arrange for music to be played during the breaks and lunch hour.
5. Seating arrangement - team style works best for groups under 30. Larger groups benefit most with classroom style seating. If you have a large group and are forced to use round tables, seat people in a semicircle if possible, so everyone can see the speaker.
6. Maximize group interaction. (Calculate net participation time divided by total Sales meeting time)
7. PowerPoint presentations - less is more. Less slides and less content on each slide. PRESENTATION TIP - tell all presenters to darken the screen whenever the topic being discussed is not on the screen. You can darken the screen by hitting the letter (B) on the keyboard. By hitting the letter (B) again your screen image will reappear.
8. Speaker preparation - I would encourage all presenters to prepare and rehearse the first 25 words and the last 25 words of every presentation. The four best ways to begin a presentation include using a quotation, a compelling statement, a rhetorical question, or telling a brief success story preferably about one of your salespeople.

9. Keeping to the schedule - keeping to the schedule is easy. Tell all presenters when they have five minutes left someone will hold up a sign that says (5) and when there is one minute left a sign that says (1) will be held up. Whenever someone blows past their allotted time a designated manager should stand up and start applauding exclaiming "we have to have you back again." Naturally you shouldn't consider doing this if the guilty party happens to be your CEO or president. <Grin>

10. Open forums - great idea except when it is scheduled at the very end of the meeting. Never risk ending your meeting on a sour note.

11. Lunches - remember everybody who is unaccustomed to sitting all morning has been sitting all morning. Forcing them into a dining room for a served/sit-down luncheon isn't generally a good idea, especially on a daily basis. Deli lunches that include soups, salads, and Deli sandwiches work best and should satisfy almost every diet. People who want to eat fast - can and people who want to enjoy their meal and engage in some chitchat can enjoy their conversation.

12. Handouts - at the beginning of every year give all sales representatives a (big) three-ring binder. Include enough tabs for all planned regional and National Sales Meetings. Tell all presenters to make sure all handouts are three-hole punched.

13. Role-plays - always include three-person/30 minute role-plays after all sales training programs. Not to practice what was just taught should be considered a cardinal sin.

14. Case studies - take an existing account/opportunity and do some brainstorming. You'll be amazed at the outcome.

15. Icebreakers - the best source is Ed Scannell's book, "The Games That Trainers Play."

16. Breaks - the length of the break should be determined by the size of the group and the size of the washroom facilities. If you have 25 salespeople 15 minutes is sufficient. Position breaks so that there is an equal amount of meeting time before and after the break. TIP - tell your salespeople they are free to freshen their coffee and go to the washrooms any time. Don't make them feel like prisoners and expect positive outcomes.

17. Do what it takes to avoid monotone speakers. Record all presentations and ask all presenters to give their manager a written critique of the recorded presentation. Ask each presenter to have a crystal glass and a spoon ready before they begin listening to their recording. Tell them to hit the glass every time they hear "Ah's" and "Um's."

18. Avoid starting your National Sales Meeting with a presentation of the numbers. It's OK if it's the second item on the agenda.

19. Awards night - maybe I'm missing something, but I always wonder what motivates an organization to schedule the awards banquet gala event on any night except the last night. The banquet is the perfect way, because it's a celebration, to end the meeting. Save your best for last!

20. How to avoid sounding pathetic when you're giving your presentation - never say, "I know you can't see this in the back of the room." Logically, if they can't see it why would you consider showing it? Use a handout instead.

21. Evaluations - in addition to evaluating all presentations you should also use an overall meeting evaluation. Do this at the end of the meeting to avoid chasing salespeople for months to get them to turn in their evaluations. Your evaluations should include questions like:

=> What did you like most about the meeting?

=> If you could change anything about the meeting what would you change?

=> What's the most important thing you learned at this meeting?

=> What would you like to see included at the next meeting?

TIP - summarize all evaluations and be certain to share this with your salespeople.

In conclusion, your National Sales Meetings are a big investment in time and money. Make it a memorable event. Naturally, senior management wants to set the agenda and adjust expectations for the coming year. You can keep raising the bar if you continue to focus on sharpening your sales force's professional Selling Skills. I hope you've been able to take away a few practical ideas that will help you when you're planning your next National Sales Meeting.

My observations and past experience indicates the most challenging and difficult part of the planning process is defining specific and quantifiable meeting objectives. These Meetings are prime time for you and your company.

I am a Sales Strategist. I work with business owners, senior sales executives, and professional salespeople who want to significantly increase their sales. If you need help planning your next National Sales Meeting please call me at (800) 266-1268.

If it's more convenient send me an email: <mailto:jim@meisenheimer.com> or you can visit my website: <http://www.meisenheimer.com/> For a very small investment I'd be happy to review your preliminary National Sales Meeting agenda and share my recommendations with you and your management team during a one-hour conference call.

And if you'd like any session on any aspect of using the phone in sales, I suggest hiring Art Sobczak of Business By Phone, Inc. He does outstanding programs on prospecting and telesales for both outside and inside sales organizations. You can contact Art at (800) 326-7721, <mailto:ArtS@BusinessByPhone.com>, <http://www.businessbyphone.com/>.

A good National Sales Meeting is like a burning ember, it lingers on and on!

