



## Developing the Field Sales Force: e-Learning and StorageTek

### Background and Objective

StorageTek, long recognized for its technical and product innovation, sought to develop the ability of its sales force (many of whom were drawn from engineering backgrounds) to communicate with a broader range of individuals in potential client companies. In identifying areas for improvement, StorageTek determined that its sales reps should focus more on probing questions about business needs in order to position the company's offerings as end-to-end solutions to customer challenges.

To this end, StorageTek commissioned the Gronstedt Group to develop a series of interactive, CD-ROM-based "sales simulators" so the field force could practice applying the company's sales methodology to actual sales situations. "StorageTek's objective is to enable the sales force to better serve the customer by identifying needs that offer a strategic solution through a simulation-based training program," said Michael McLay, vice president of U.S./Canada sales and service. "The Gronstedt Group has unique experiences in developing customized game-based simulations to help us reach our objective."

The purpose of the training series was to help transition the sales force from merely reciting product benefits and pushing boxes to becoming skilled sales consultants with the diagnostic tools to develop complete storage management solutions. The customized simulations, based on the selling methodology StorageTek already used, taught the field to identify customer needs and build profitable customer relationships.

### Challenges

StorageTek standard, instructor-led training presented a myriad of challenges to the Colorado-based data storage leader. First, reps in the field didn't feel like they could afford to take time away from their scheduled client visits to sit in training sessions to learn or practice the selling methodology the company had recently implemented. Second, the travel and boarding expenses associated with flying thousands of reps to centralized events were exorbitant. Third, reps in the field had difficulty keeping up with industry and product developments, as their schedules were filled with client meetings and travel. These concerns led the company to explore the advantages of online, simulation-based training alternatives.

The Gronstedt Group faced a series of challenges in the production of the simulation-based training programs. First, the firm had to acquire a basic working understanding of StorageTek's business, and of the storage sector generally. Second, the Gronstedt team had to develop workable processes by which it could, working with StorageTek subject matter experts, translate complex technical specs and product-based sales materials into coherent customer-facing information that served potential clients' business needs. Since StorageTek's technical experts were generally too busy to be spared for this training task, exceptional project management skills on the part of both companies were required. The Gronstedt Group also performed significant market research so that the training application would accurately represent the

structures, challenges and needs faced by a variety of potential clients (one large retailer, a financial services company and a media conglomerate) for storage technology.

## **Solution**

The Gronstedt Group devised a two-pronged solution for StorageTek. The primary training application was the Best Seller simulation suite, a gamed-based digital role-play that scored players on how well they identified client business needs, adapted solutions to those needs and defended their choices in an extended objection handling suite with the client company's executives. The second component, the StorageZoo, was a series of CD audio recordings that reps could listen to in their cars, and which were designed to impart ongoing product and competitive information in an entertaining format.

The first Best Seller was launched at StorageTek's Kick Start 2001 sales conference. A special version was tailored for the live event context, and the full version was made available after the event on CD-ROM. The field's response indicated that the program was a resounding success, and as a result the US/Canada Training and Development group asked the Gronstedt Group to develop two new CD-ROM-based training programs, one for StorageTek's disk products and another, more international production for the company's tape division.

Each simulation was built around a fictitious customer company. The participants could interview and answer questions from people at different levels of the customer organization. Background and supplemental information was presented throughout the game in the form of television and radio news, discussions with StorageTek colleagues and other research sources. The training highlighted the importance of understanding customers' business needs, emphasized the background research process and stressed the value of asking probing questions at all levels of the customer organization. The simulations reinforced the worth of building relationships at all levels of the enterprise and focused on balancing StorageTek's IT *and* business messages. The field learned to match customer needs with the most appropriate technical solutions, persuade customers about the benefits of the solutions, handle objections and successfully close the deal. The end result? Learning to build profitable long-term customer relationships.

For StorageTek, there were multiple advantages to moving part of the sales curriculum to the computer.

- With the field participating in training from their desktops, no travel expenses, training facilities or teachers are required.
- Reps can set their own schedules and squeeze classes in between client meetings.
- Assessment questions to gauge learning may be sprinkled throughout the course, allowing managers to monitor training progress.
- Participants can go back and review material whenever they need a refresher course.
- The programs can be used to introduce newly hired sales reps.

More to the point, e-learning creates a unique and engaging learning experience with a one-to-one ratio between students and the virtual teacher. Sales reps get to close a sale, respond to customer complaints, reiterate brand messages and solve a case. It's a powerful and cost-efficient way to actually get people excited about learning.

Intended as a supplement to the Best Seller program, the StorageZoo audio CDs were humorous vehicles for transmitting basic industry and product updates to the sales force. The StorageZoo was modeled on the popular sports talk radio format, but focused on storage

instead of sports. StorageTek executives, in studio as special guest experts, explained the benefits of new product developments and fielded tough questions from "callers," who were usually sales reps or customers facing a particular set of data storage problems. The Gronstedt Group peppered the radio show with funny "commercials" for competitor products and played the sports radio analogy to the hilt. The StorageTek sales force has been ecstatic about the way they can learn and laugh while driving to a client meeting.

## **Results**

The StorageTek sales force has learned to position the company's products as strategic solutions, focusing on the client's particular business needs instead of their own product list. The applications described above were 100% customized for StorageTek, incorporating their products, their lingo, their challenges, their sales methodology, their technical platforms, their competitive landscape and even their own executives, many of whom were cast as actors in the simulation (a tactic that often made for a very entertaining learning experience). This series of three sales simulators has provided this client an astonishing return-on-investment proposition.

Based on feedback from the StorageTek sales force, it's clear that this kind of blended approach to learning can be wildly successful. Overall satisfaction with the live debut of Best Seller I was an average of 4.23 on a five-point scale, with five being "excellent." On the open-ended question, "What will you do differently as a result of the training?" a majority of the reps indicated that they would "prepare business questions for customer visits," "sell to executive levels" and "sell business solutions," all of which were identified by the client in advance as key learning goals for the simulation.