

# Business

## Sandler Sales Training: Is It Worth the Cost?

by Charles Wardell

**F**or small contractors in today's competitive market, sales skills can make the difference between struggling and prospering. Yet many contractors turn up their noses at formal sales training, viewing it as a waste of time and money. Are they right? Or is enrolling in a training program an effective way to improve sales skills — and the company's bottom line?

To get answers, I interviewed contractors who are or have been students of Sandler Training, a sales training company with centers located around the country. I also interviewed several Sandler trainers. While most

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students gave the training high marks, some objected to the cost, and everyone agreed that getting your money's worth requires serious commitment and a willingness to try sales techniques that may feel uncomfortable at first.

### Success Story

Donna Shirey, president of Shirey Contracting in Issaquah, Wash., is a former schoolteacher. She had always considered herself a good communicator, but in the 1990s she found herself falling short of her sales goals and realized she needed help. "I didn't know how to qualify prospects or what questions to ask," she recalls. "I was spending way too much time with people who were in no position to buy. Talk about spinning your wheels!"

In 1998, after talking with a friend who was a Sandler student, Shirey decided to give the program a shot. She eventually enrolled the company's entire sales and office staff. Five employees from Shirey's contracting division started sales training in 2005; that division's revenue has since doubled. Four people from the company's handyman division began training in early 2007; Shirey

projects a 50 percent revenue increase for that division this year. She credits much of the growth in both departments to the training.

### How It Works

Sandler Training typically starts with a two-day boot camp, followed by weekly classes at training centers. The classes involve lots of role-playing, with an emphasis on handling various sales situations. Written and audio modules reinforce the classroom lessons. Some trainers also offer individual monthly consultations. Students set goals each month, and the trainer holds them accountable for meeting those goals. For example, a goal for Shirey's handyman division — which does 1,000 jobs per year — was for every employee to call three past customers.

Although Sandler's literature touts its sales philosophy as unique, contractors who have gone through the training say that most of the advice is available elsewhere. What is distinctive about Sandler's approach is that this advice has been packaged into a system; asked to identify what they find most valuable about the program, students invariably mention how it has helped them develop a consistent sales method for all employees to follow with every prospect. "Because everyone in the company sells the same way, we all know what clients have been told at any point," says Shirey.

### Shut Up and Listen

Jim Stephens of Crossroads Business Development in Boise, Idaho — the Sandler center that works with Shirey — says that the training teaches people how to get clients to persuade themselves to buy. "The only person who can sell you is you," he says. "I can only provide the sounding board. Selling happens when I listen."

The Sandler philosophy assumes that 80 percent of customers buy to ease a "pain" of some sort. Much of the training focuses on how to probe for this pain. For example, suppose a contractor is called in to price a new deck. According to Stephens, he should take time to determine why the prospects want to replace the existing one. Maybe

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they like to entertain but are embarrassed by their deck's appearance. Maybe they're worried about their kids getting splinters. The trick is to ask questions and then listen to the answers.

This strategy doesn't come naturally to everyone. The first inclination of some contractors when meeting with prospects is to pull out the presentation book — a big mistake, say Sandler students. "I used to think the best way to land a job was to show off my expertise," says Chris Lund of Heritage Home Carpentry in Shrewsbury, Mass. Since immersing himself in the Sandler program, however, Lund has changed his approach. Now he doesn't talk about his company until he's spent time building rapport with customers and listening to their needs. "I've learned that people won't do business with me unless they have bought in emotionally. That has been the big shift in my thinking in dealing with homeowners."

Doug Croft, general manager of Stronghold Construction in Boise, Idaho, is another Sandler student who is sold on the power of listening. Croft, who worked as an accountant before getting into construction, says that asking questions relieves the pressure to perform. He recalls a case where a couple asked him to bid on a major remodel that would transform their property into a "green" home. "I made it clear that I knew nothing about green remodeling, but I asked a lot of questions about what they wanted and told them that I could get their questions answered by people more familiar with green technologies." He got the job. "They thought I was a genius," he says. "The important thing to them was that I cared enough to listen — that I wanted to learn about what they cared about."

Without the training, Croft says, he may have faked expertise. "I would have spent hours gnawing on their ear. I'd have gone in with a big presentation to show how much I knew. And they probably would have booted me out the door."

### It's All About Control

Some students say the training taught them how to take control of the sales process. Kevin Barnes of Barnes Building in Holden, Mass., says the Sandler method put him in the driver's seat. "With so many contractors bending over backward to get work, buyers have learned how to get free quotes and free consulting. I saw value in a system that would let me take control of the process."

For Lund, taking control meant learning how to weed out bid shoppers. "The more you use the system, the more quickly you know whether a potential job is real. We now have a better understanding of who is worthy of pursuing, based on their answers to our questions," he says.

Students are also urged to establish a meeting agenda — or "up-front contract" — with buyers before every phone call or meeting, and to revisit it at the end of the conversation and set an agenda for the next meeting. "At the end of every meeting we either close the sales process or move it forward," Barnes says. "If they are going to say no, we want to bring that out early."

Another Sandler directive is to get the budget defined early on. "In the past, someone might have told us that they wanted a second floor on their house, then after writing up a detailed proposal, we would find out that they only had \$20,000 to spend," says Barnes. Now he works with customers to define the rough budget and scope of work before writing a proposal.

### Not for Everyone

Not all Sandler students find what they're looking for. Joe Crisara was a Chicago-area hvac contractor when he took the training 10 years ago. He thought it was too geared toward corporate clients and has since started his own training company just for residential contractors. Most of his students are in the sub-trades, with a smattering of remodelers and small home builders. His clients, he says, believe that their businesses are different from the corporate cli-

ents so many Sandler trainers focus on.

Another common objection is cost. According to the half-dozen trainers interviewed for this article, prices for a single student average around \$10,000 per year, with discounts to companies that send several employees. Most Sandler centers offer a test drive — the boot camp plus a couple of months of training for a few thousand dollars. And some will craft a payment plan based on the student's business revenue. "If someone needs help, we can stretch the payments out to make it affordable," says Jim Kaufman, a Sandler trainer at The Training Center in Lafayette Hill, Pa. "We work with people as long as they stay committed."

Jerrald Hayes of Paradigm Projects, a remodeling company in Katonah, N.Y., nearly signed up for Sandler 10 years ago but balked at the price. He saw value in the Sandler system, however, and claims to have put most of it into practice on his own. In his view, the most important part of the system is learning to ask clients the right questions and listen to the answers. He tells about bidding on a deck for a couple that had bought an old ranch house: "A lot of contractors would go in and start pricing the deck, but by asking the right questions I discovered the underlying problem — they felt boxed in by their house." He was able to sell them on a door to the backyard as well as a new deck.

Hayes cautions that it takes real self-discipline to follow the system consistently. And many Sandler students say they'd quickly fall into old habits if someone weren't holding them accountable. "Accountability is a big part of what we provide," says Kaufman. "Our job is to make sure people use the system. You can know our stuff, but if you don't get in front of enough customers and put it into practice, that knowledge won't do you much good."

*Charles Wardell is a JLC contributing editor.*