Adapting Sales Enablement for Virtual Learning with Michael Blanchette

Introduction

[0:12] Jessica Ly: Welcome to Tech It Up with Jessica Ly. I'm here with Michael Blanchette, who's the Senior Director of Sales Enablement at Veeam. Mike, welcome to the show.

[0:20] Michael Blanchette: Hi. Thanks. Happy to be here.

[0:20] Jessica Ly: Veeam is such a phenomenal company, with over a billion dollars in revenue and over 4,000 employees. You're in data backup for a lot of web applications, like Office 365, for example.

You've done a phenomenal job at Veeam over the last three years on the sales enablement side, so I wanted to ask if you could share your expertise with us.

[0:44] Jessica Ly: So, just very quickly, let us know your role and the scope of the work that you're doing at Veeam.

[0:54] Michael Blanchette: Sure, yes. As you mentioned, I'm the Senior Director of what we call Sales Acceleration, or Sales Enablement, here at Veeam. Our responsibilities involve the training and development of all of our different sales roles, whether that's field, inside, or technical, as well as our channel partners.

We also have certification programs that extend to our customer base. So, our team develops all that content and delivers it.

Section 1: From Training Order-Taking to Performance Consultancy

[1:20] Jessica Ly: Three years ago, you were invited to take over this role, and you have a lot of expertise coming out of SAP and VMware. So, what was the situation before, and tell us about the impact you've made? Specifically, I think the onboarding is where you've seen a 50% improvement in time to first deal for reps, for example, but tell us about that.

[1:42] Michael Blanchette: Sure. So, I think the biggest thing I noticed when joining the team was that there was a lot of what I guess I would refer to as training order-taking going on.

We were very much sort of, "Intake, say yes, and deliver." And the challenge with that is, one, it's not scalable, and two, when you're developing that content or going through that process, sometimes the things you're being asked for aren't necessarily the things that you ought to be focusing on.

Having been a salesperson and a sales manager, I can say with some deference and respect that very often, when they ask for some enablement, sometimes they're wrong in what it is that they're looking for.

So, an example might be a sales manager coming up to us and saying, "We need negotiation training." Really? Why?

And if you go through a couple of rounds of "Why? Why? Why?" you find out that maybe it's not negotiation training, but maybe it's being better at selling value up front so that you're not getting beaten up in negotiation on the back end.

So, we tried to pivot from being just training order-takers to being more of a performance consultancy and trying to be a little bit more proactive in what it is that we develop.

Because the other challenge with waiting for an ask is, if you're coming to me with that, then it's already too late. You've seen the problem, you've seen what the effect of that is, and now you're asking us to kind of catch up and fix a problem that we might be too late to fix.

We don't want to use revenue as the bellwether of whether or not we're doing our job. We want to look at leading indicators to make sure that we're headed in the right direction from the start.

Section 2: Redesigning Sales Onboarding for Faster Ramp-Up

[3:10] Jessica Ly: Well, tell us some of the ROI, the impact, the results.

[3:18] Michael Blanchette: Sure. So, as we were talking, the onboarding program was one of the first things that we really kind of rolled up our sleeves around and looked at and said, "How do we revamp this in a way that's going to be compelling and most impactful to the organization?"

A lot of companies, Veeam included at the time, had sort of a, you know, "drink from the fire hose" approach. You get brought into the organization, and whether it's two days or two weeks, you learn everything that you need to know about the company.

The problem is, you forget 60% to 80% of that two weeks later. And so what we

decided was, maybe if we build something that's more just-in-time, so that we're sort of following the journey of the onboarding person and giving them what they need when they need it, it does a couple of things.

One, it makes sure that more of it is retained. And then, more importantly, you think about the drain that happens on the sales force.

So, if I am a new hire and I learn everything I need to know in two weeks, and then three weeks later I forget that thing that I really need right now, who am I going to ask? I'm going to either ask my manager or, more likely, a colleague and say, "Hey, how do I do this thing?"

And so now I'm creating a drain on fully productive sales reps, and they're having to train me or update me on something that I was supposed to have learned two weeks ago.

And so, by putting this more modular approach that follows the onboarder journey, we've been able to reduce that drain and increase the productivity.

So, a couple of examples of that: We've seen, for inside sales teams, for example, a 50% improvement in their time to KPIs, their time to first opportunities, and their time to first call.

So, some really compelling numbers around, wow, we're shortening the ramp-up time. And if you think about an onboarding program, that's what it's about: How fast you get a new hire into the organization and a producing member of the corporate society, if you will.

So, that's been a big focus for us, and we've seen a lot of positive success there.

Section 3: Measuring Enablement Impact and ROI

[5:09] Jessica Ly: Now, measuring your effectiveness can be at different levels, and so, you know, you talk about retention of knowledge. That's one way, where you can quiz them, right? The sales cycle timeframe [unclear] to have an opportunity—but what about ultimately, how do you tie it, and what have you seen as far as the revenue increase?

[5:33] Michael Blanchette: Yeah, so it depends on the program, right? When we look at something like the onboarding program, you can start to look at time to first deal, and you can start to do some calculations there.

But because there are so many things that touch revenue, it can be difficult to sort of isolate what part of that was enablement, what part of that was the great sales manager's job, or the other things that go on there.

So, what we've done is we've implemented a framework using the Phillips ROI Institute to kind of break that

out and start to do some isolation around those things.

So, an example that I can give that doesn't tie necessarily to enablement or to revenue specifically, but to pipeline generation as an example: We looked at the way that we're training the team to generate sales-generated pipeline, in addition to what is done by marketing or our channel partners.

And through some very targeted learning efforts, using sort of that performance consultancy that I talked about earlier, we've seen up to a 25% increase in year-over-year pipeline build by those new hires.

Because they're becoming more effective and more efficient in the way they're making the calls and the way that they're approaching the target audience, we're seeing a significant ramp-up.

So, we spend a lot of time in what I would refer to, or what the Phillips model refers to, as that Level 4, that business impact before you get to revenue. And we've seen some pretty strong results there.

[7:06] Jessica Ly: Sometimes I think people are good at taking tests. So, maybe they will study the content and do very well on the test, but when you then look at hitting quotas and achieving beyond the quota, it's not necessarily correlating, right?

[7:15] Michael Blanchette: Yeah.

Section 4: Creating Sales-Ready Messaging

[7:23] Jessica Ly: And, you know, I want to touch on the content itself, because the content that you provide to the sales rep does matter. If you're talking about industry content or thought leadership content—more strategic content that looks at overall business transformation—that kind of content is important in driving the conversation with a prospect and enabling them to get a much bigger deal in the end, rather than talking about functions and features of a product and having a transactional conversation.

How much are you involved in actually creating that content?

[7:58] Michael Blanchette: Yeah, yeah. So, our team sits inside of the Global Marketing organization. I report to our CMO, and we have a very strong relationship with our product marketing team, so we work very closely with them.

The way we've approached that is what we refer to as sales-ready messaging. Marketing in general can be really good at that third-party messaging or customer-facing messaging, but if we haven't done the translation of how a seller takes that message and makes it into a meaningful conversation with their customer, then you miss an opportunity.

And if you sort of expect every seller to be able to translate that the same way, then you can run into some challenges or risks.

So, what we've done is we've built a framework where we educated our marketing team on our sales process and our sales methodology, so they understand the conversation framework. They understand the interactive model that we've built.

And then we have a process by which we create this SRM, or sales-ready messaging, that we use and take it from the speeds and feeds, like you say.

Because a customer, while at a technical level that certainly is important and there are areas where that conversation has to happen, if I'm talking to an executive decision-maker, they really don't want to hear about speeds and feeds. They want to hear about how Veeam is going to help them keep their business online 24/7.

And so that's the conversation that we're teaching them to have. And so we work very closely, hand in hand, with our product marketing team to do that.

Section 5: Building a Technology Roadmap for Virtual Learning

[9:20] Jessica Ly: Let's talk about the future. Where do you feel sales enablement can push the envelope as far as innovation, processes, and technology? Because there's always room for improvement, right?

[9:38] Michael Blanchette: For sure. Yeah. Well, and we're—I think COVID was a great forcing function for a lot of this, right?

We've got a bunch of different technologies that we use to help with distance-based delivery and all that sort of stuff. But what we've found is that if you start to push tools to the real outer limits of what they can do, sometimes that can result in some hairy experiences, which aren't great learning experiences for the learner.

So, my team's just actually decided to kick off this focus of a learning roadmap, or a technology roadmap, that we want to put in place for ourselves.

And I think the strategy we're going to take is sort of a use-case approach of saying, "Okay, if this is the particular use case, from concept to design to development to delivery to measurement, what are the different tools and toolsets we might need?"

And I think our approach is going to be to really look at best-of-breed to figure out how to cobble that together and really kind of know where one begins and one ends, and have a strategy for that.

So that we're all leveraging the same tools internally and not putting strains on the system in that way.

It'll help with consistency in the process and also limit some of the challenges or risks that you might see, because in this virtual world that we're all living in right now, good enough on the delivery side is not good enough.

Because if something breaks, then it's a really bad experience for the learner, and we're trying to avoid that.

Section 6: Adapting Sales Enablement for Virtual Learning

[11:01] Jessica Ly: Yeah, and I think you touch on this COVID situation making changes to the way you deliver. I want to ask you to share your lessons learned so far about online sales enablement, because we are no longer gathering in groups and doing breakouts in groups in person.

So, the online environment is actually putting certain demands on your resources that you didn't expect until you actually do it, right? So, tell us about that.

[11:32] Michael Blanchette: Sure, yeah. So, a great example of that is our sales process and methodology workshop. It's typically either a two- or three-day live, in-class program, depending on the sales role.

And the challenge with that now is, since, as you say, no one's getting together in rooms, we had to figure out, all right, how do we deliver that?

So, two things came into play. One is, you're not going to sit somebody in a Zoom call or a Teams call, or whatever you're using, for two or three solid days. That's not going to happen.

So, you have to really kind of pivot to this idea of a learning campaign rather than a learning event.

And then, in doing that, really understanding that the facilitator has to be able to really focus on facilitation.

So, in the live workshop, it could be that one person is delivering the content, you break the teams out and they do their skills practice activities, and I can walk the floor and have conversations and answer questions and all that.

And in this virtual world, while I can still virtually walk the floor, I can only be in one breakout room at a time.

So, actually, what used to be a one-person show is now a two- or a three-person show, where you've got someone that's facilitating, someone that's producing, someone that's teeing up content and getting that ready. You might have an audio or a video producer if you're bringing video into the program as well.

So, it's a lot more hands and a lot more coordination.

So, the experience from the learner isn't necessarily different other than they're sitting at their house and taking it on. But really, the big change was, from a delivery standpoint, really being coordinated and organized and recognizing that this becomes a bit of a video production.

It's not just a one-person show anymore. Or at least, those things that you want to be highly interactive—you can still do a webinar and have that be a one-to-many, but if you're trying to have interaction and conversation and dialogue, one-to-many doesn't work as well.

[13:14] Jessica Ly: And what is the size of your event so far that you've been able to manage?

[13:23] Michael Blanchette: Yeah, so that's the other thing, is we've really sort of tried to pare that down. So, what used to be maybe a 30-person class, now we might break that into two or three different classes and have, you know, 10 to 15 people in a room at a time.

It's a bit more manageable. People tend to be a bit more open in smaller groups, and so we've, you know, tried to cater to the learning experience that way as well.

[13:49] Jessica Ly: Excellent. Well, this has been a very educational, informative conversation. I appreciate you, Mike, being on the show and actually sharing what's going on in your world and sharing the best practices with us.

[13:56] Michael Blanchette: Happy to do it. Thanks for having us.

[13:56] Jessica Ly: There you have it. Tech It Up with Jessica Ly. Mike Blanchette from Veeam.

[END]