

SPIN[®]: simply a better way to sell

A personal experience, by Richard King,
deputy managing partner, Ernst & Young



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In whatever walk of life, the best methods are often those that make things simple. And this has certainly been the experience of Richard King, deputy managing partner, Ernst & Young in the area of sales training.

King, who is retiring from the leading international accountancy practice after 35 years with the firm, first came into contact with SPIN® as a training tool in the late 1980s and has been a keen advocate of the Huthwaite International approach ever since.

“The marketplace for accounting services has changed dramatically over the past two decades,” he confirms.

“However, Huthwaite’s flexible, research-based approach to training, which focuses on the development of appropriate sales behaviours rather than simply improving technical skills, is as relevant and powerful as ever.”

New team, new goals

In 1989, three years after he was made a partner, King took over Ernst & Young’s Luton office. At that time, the office was keen to cut its cost base, but at the same time grow revenues, improve profitability and expand the client base. *“Quite a challenge!”* he recalls.

“We had a lot of youthful enthusiasm to build the business, yet needed to channel this in a way which would deliver the success we wanted. The answer was to adopt a consistent sales methodology which was simple, effective and would give us a common language, enabling us to support and challenge each other, both before and after each sales opportunity.”

“SPIN® proved ideal, as it provided us with the techniques and disciplined approach we needed in order to understand client needs and so build longer-term and more profitable client relationships.” Every manager and partner in the Luton office underwent the SPIN® training programme which incorporated a series of tailored case studies and roleplays, enabling participants to relate the new skills to their existing client environment.

This was recognised as especially pioneering in an accountancy environment in which, until 1986, firms had not been allowed to advertise, promote or cold-call their services. The improvement in performance was both dramatic and immediate and within five years the Luton office had become one of Ernst & Young’s fastest growing offices.

King recalls that a number of significant hurdles had to be overcome before this level of success could be achieved.

“In a professional services environment, technically accomplished ‘experts’ were initially reluctant to see themselves as ‘sellers’. At the same time, we knew that a traditional ‘push’ style, which focused on the technical aspects of our proposition rather than fully understanding the client’s business need, was becoming increasingly inappropriate in the face of a more knowledgeable and demanding client base.”

“The key to success was to recognise that our role was not to sell, but to help clients buy, the services we offered. Here the SPIN® framework was central to helping individuals understand and secure agreement on the client’s real need, in order to develop a truly relevant and effective solution in response. And in a number of cases, this had the additional benefit of moving clients from an essentially transactional to a deeper, more value-added, partnership-type relationship.”

Long-term benefits

The success of SPIN® training was measurable as a valuable component in achieving ambitious growth targets, higher close rates and out-performing the competition. At the same time, King witnessed a greater degree of confidence in individuals as they adopted a more structured sales approach, as well as an increased ability to work together in using a common language at each stage of the sale.

This reflected his pragmatic approach to training. *“Though we could see that the Huthwaite approach was clearly changing behaviours for the better, this would have been of little value if it had not been accompanied by an improvement in hard sales numbers,”* he confirms.

Another key feature of the success achieved by King and his team was that, from the outset, SPIN® training was not perceived as a series of unconnected, one-off activities, *“which, like a snowball on a hot plate, have a short life expectancy”*.

Rather, it became embedded as a continuous process of pre-course planning and preparation, training and coaching and reinforcement. This mirrored his broader approach to improvement initiatives: *“If you can’t operationalise it, you shouldn’t do it.”*

The more things change...

King was subsequently appointed managing partner at the Luton office and he introduced SPIN® concepts successfully to other UK offices as his role expanded.

Two decades on, King still uses SPIN® personally and finds it very natural to use in a wide range of client and other third-party relationships. It continues to prove useful in a business development context, such as selling face to face and reviewing proposals, and also in conducting appraisals.

King continues to coach new and junior members of staff at Ernst & Young and encourages them to be ‘nosy and brave’ in trying to understand the client’s business challenges ‘and not always

having to be the expert’. Similarly, he believes it is important to recognise when to hand off the sale to someone more senior who may be better-placed to craft the most persuasive benefit statement.

He believes that the SPIN® model fits well with these principles. It is also particularly important to adopt a consistent high quality approach to customer relationship management within a global firm demanding global excellence in all parts of its operation.

Yet in helping him throughout his career, the reason why the Huthwaite International approach is successful is even more fundamental: *“Put simply, when so much in business is overly complex, SPIN® is essentially simple,”* he says. *“And it works.”*





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