



RAISING THE BAR ON CPG SALES FORCE TALENT

ASM's ACE program recruits and trains next generation of industry leaders



A few years ago, the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) and The Network of Executive Women (NEW) published a study exploring how the evolution of the retail landscape is elevating the role of CPG sales force talent management.

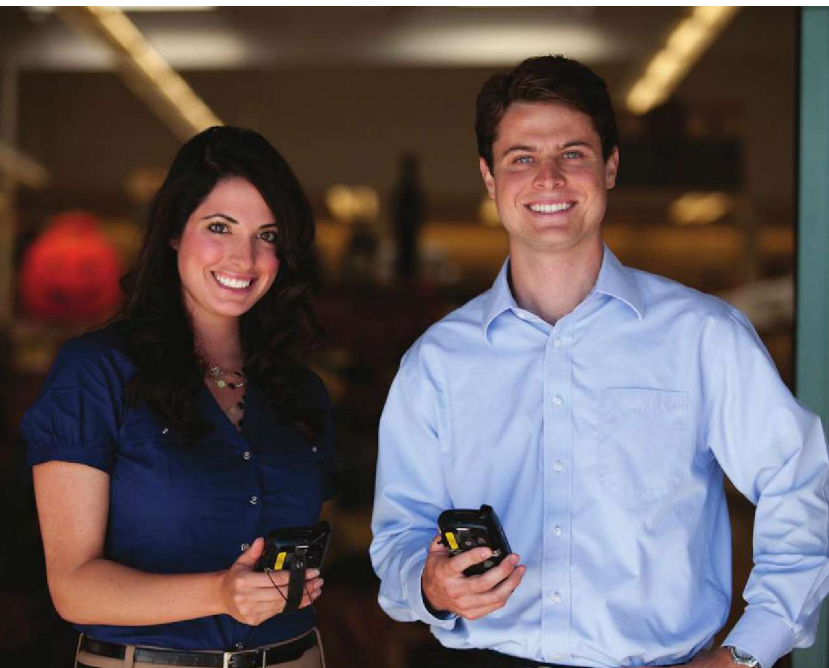
“Corporate leaders and boards of directors are recognizing that consumer trends and industry dynamics are changing the rules of the game, for sales in particular. And nowhere is this change more evident than in the consumer packaged goods industry, where the quality of salespeople has as much to do with success as the quality of the product,” the report, *Talent Triage: Raising the Bar for CPG Sales Force Talent Management*, says. “Unfortunately many CPG salespeople lack these skills and cannot deliver the analytical, financial, cross-functional and strategic abilities that retailers need.”

Advantage Sales and Marketing (ASM), an Irvine, Calif.-based sales and marketing agency (SMA) with

35,000 associates who represent leading CPG brands to retail headquarters nationwide, was well aware of the evolved talent profile it needed to furnish to meet the needs of its clients. “There is more data available; there are more places to shop, including online; and demographics are changing,” says Tanya Domier, CEO. “Sales associates need a general management mindset. They need to be ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’ armed with an evolved skillset that will enable them to make the right recommendations to headquarters.”

The need for a higher standard of SMA talent is also evident through the growing number of strategic services they provide for clients, such as shopper marketing and advanced category management and shopper insights. It is equally apparent from the evolution of legacy services such as retail merchandising.

“If you take a look at merchandising, it used to be simply about ‘stack it high, watch it fly,’” says Domier.



“But it has become very strategic in terms of the work done, the technology operated, and the skillset required. We even integrate store level POS data into our retail technology for distribution management, display compliance and delivering selling presentations to store managers.”

Another factor is that while now requiring a higher caliber of talent, entry point jobs in CPG sales have lost some their visibility for two reasons. First, there is a broader array of industries recruiting on college campuses today. Second, sales and merchandising functions have been increasingly outsourced to SMAs who historically did not have the recruiting resources or name recognition across college graduates to compete for them that the CPG manufacturers had when hiring them directly.

Recognizing the need for a comprehensive program that would raise the bar on recruiting and training, ASM stepped in to fill that talent void in 2009. “ASM

The ACE Advantage

From the initial recruiting phase through graduation from the program, the year-long ACE program takes a robust, multi-faceted approach to identifying and training its Leadership Development Associates (LDAs).

The company taps internal associates, clients and customers for referrals, and also works with key colleges with programs focused on the CPG industry and marketing. ASM also leverages its relationship with Enactus, a nonprofit organization of student, academic and business leaders committed to using the power of entrepreneurial action to transform lives and shape a better more sustainable world.

“Enactus is one of our best sources for LDAs,” Bianchi reports. “It focuses on partnering business professionals and organizations with college students; as a result, it helps us identify schools that have CPG-type majors and programs so we know we are recruiting the right kind of candidates.”

Prospective LDAs go through an assessment and interview process during which senior leaders and former ACE participants paint a realistic picture of what the ACE Program entails. Once hired, ASM offers new employees an on-boarding experience that helps associates with school-to-work transition tasks involved in moving and adapting to post-college life.

Then the real work begins. During an immersion workshop at ASM headquarters, LDAs learn about the company and their role within it and interact with senior leadership, including the CEO and the heads of sales and marketing.

Next they are assigned to “carry the bag” in a specific business unit—retail sales, experiential marketing or category management, for example.

The program’s focus on cross-functional training allows LDAs to perform the job to which they’re assigned, and concurrently, to develop leadership skills while interacting with personnel from throughout the organization.

LDAs also engage in multiple client-focused projects with team members across the United States. In 2012, those projects included discovering more effective ways to target by key demographics and implementing strategies to grow the business for clients such as the J.M. Smucker Company, Unilever, and Bumble Bee. Associates are matched for more permanent roles in the business unit that aligns with their talent, skillset and preference after developing the necessary skills.

“These associates need to understand the ins and outs of technology, reporting, and every service offering across their organization if they are to make an impact,” Bianchi stresses.

A game-changing mentorship model is also an integral component of the ACE program. From day one, LDAs are assigned a ‘coach’ who has industry experience and a desire to pass on knowledge. In addition, they have direct access to and mentorship from ASM’s executive leaders. At the conclusion of the program, every LDA is assigned an executive mentor as a career guide.

“The goal of ACE is to recruit top talent from top universities and start building their skills for the future.” Katie Bianchi, Chief Human Resources Officer

was already adept at both large volume staffing and building robust training programs in everything from merchandising best practices, to persuasive selling skills for its experiential marketing associates, to advanced analytical training for category managers,” says Katie Bianchi, Chief Human Resources Officer. The company began to leverage these abilities in recruiting and talent development to create the Accelerated Career Experience (ACE)—a program designed to make CPG careers more visible and appealing to top college graduates.

“The goal of ACE is to recruit top talent from top universities and start building their skills for the future,” Bianchi says. “We are bringing college graduates in and training them to become the kind of strategic thinkers who can succeed in this industry and with the brands.”

By all indications, ACE is achieving its goal. The number of program participants has skyrocketed from 17 in the inaugural class to 130 in 2012. Under-scoring the growing demand is the fact more than 2,400 applicants applied for those 130 coveted spots.

“We’ve had an 80 to 90 percent retention rate,” reports Bianchi, who credits the program’s cross-functional approach for that success. “They say it takes a village to raise a child—well it takes a team to create successful employees. Different leaders from throughout the organization get involved and all have a vested interest.”

“The ACE program is without a doubt responsible for the success that I have had in my career to date,” says Bethany Slentz, ACE class of 2009. “Through the ACE



program, I not only learned the skills that are foundational in a CPG sales career: presentation development, data analytics, customer relationship development, and retail execution to name a few, but also gained mentorship from some of the best sales leadership in my market and the broader organization.”

The program’s success prompted ASM to extend training to client and customer associates; a move Domier says, “allows us to develop unbeatable ties with our partner organizations.”

That kind of collaboration is integral to building market share and brand strength—and it is driven by a sales force equipped with the advanced sales, marketing and leadership skills.

Thanks to ASM’s ACE training program, a reliable channel now exists for identifying and cultivating a new generation of industry leaders who will fill these critical roles, and ultimately help CPG companies and retailers alike meet sales goals they strive to achieve.

For information on the ACE program, visit: <http://www.facebook.com/asmace>.

