

Virtual Sales Kickoff Meeting Strategy

By Steve W. Martin

The Internet has completely changed the way in which businesses communicate with their customers. It is also fundamentally changing the way businesses communicate with, educate, and motivate their salespeople in the field. Today, more companies than ever are rethinking their strategy to improve overall sales effectiveness and incorporating a “virtual” component to their annual sales kickoff meetings. The virtual sales kickoff meeting adds an entirely new dimension to traditional in-person meetings. Salespeople who work remotely in the field can access the meeting at their local field office or at home over the Internet and review the presentations on demand following the event.

Over the past decade, I’ve had the privilege of presenting at hundreds of annual sales kickoff meetings for leading companies all around the world. The travel, lodging, and event facility expenses required to hold these meetings sometimes ran well into seven figures.

Companies today are employing three different virtual sales kickoff strategies to maximize their training investment, reinforce the meeting messages, and extend the meeting’s motivational afterglow.

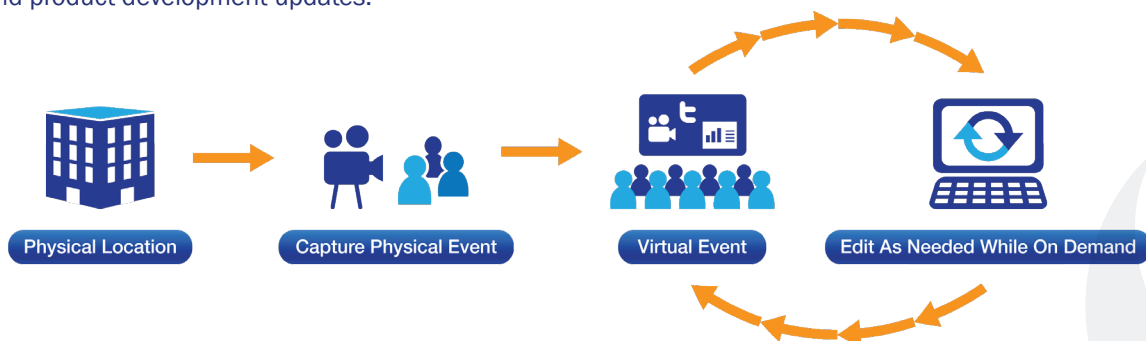
1) Sales Kickoff Meeting Capture

Sales kickoff meeting capture occurs when a traditional in-person sales kickoff is recorded, segmented, and then made available for future access over the Internet. More than a lengthy rebroadcast that is watched in one long session, the virtual sales kickoff is accessible by topic and presenter. It also continues to provide a high level of audience interaction since viewers can submit questions to presenters and interact with their colleagues long after the live presentation.



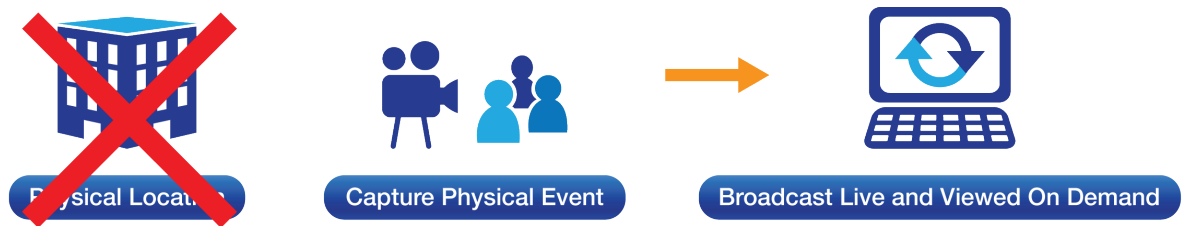
2) The Living Sales Kickoff

The living sales kickoff strategy transitions the concept of the annual sales kickoff from a one-time meeting at the beginning of the year to a perennial sales force communication platform. After the in-person meeting is captured and made available over the Internet, original presentations are updated, and new sessions are continually added throughout the year. The virtual meeting place becomes the portal which salespeople regularly access to view important messages from sales leaders and timely marketing and product development updates.



3) Full Virtual Sales Kickoff Meeting

The full virtual sales kickoff meeting replaces the traditional in-person meeting. While the attendees at a “traditional” sales kickoff meeting travel to a central meeting place, the full virtual sales kickoff meeting strategy is to deliver the meeting directly to the attendees’ desktops via the Internet. It is conducted in a studio-type setting where the speakers present directly to video cameras without a live audience present.



Which Virtual Strategy Is Right for Your Company?

Based upon my personal experience, I strongly recommend that every sales kickoff be captured for future review. Let me explain why. The average person speaks about 125 words per minute. So, it’s nearly impossible for meeting attendees to fully absorb the more than 60,000 words they hear each day.

A post-meeting review of critical sales kickoff presentations should be available so that sales teams can revisit the key takeaways and important discussions at their own pace. In addition, it’s an extremely economical way to reinforce the value and maximize the investment of the meeting. For example, the cost to capture a three-day sales kickoff meeting would be around 2-5% of the total meeting costs, depending upon the number of sessions to be recorded and video equipment required.

Only as a last resort should companies completely replace their in-person meeting with a full virtual sales kickoff meeting. Let’s face it; these are extremely difficult days to be in sales. There’s a tremendous amount of doom and gloom, compounded with anxious uncertainty. I know of several companies which cancelled their annual sales meetings only to admit later that it was a huge mistake. This is because one of the most important aspects of every annual sales meeting is the care and feeding of the sales team’s mental health. When they cancelled their meeting they drove sales force morale even lower.

Unfortunately, there are circumstances when holding the annual sales meeting becomes impractical—for example, because of the company’s financial condition or because the company is in the midst of being acquired, or other unforeseen emergencies. Even in these situations, it is imperative you at least hold a meeting online so your executive leadership can lay out the future strategy and plans to deal with the challenging times. From a cost perspective, a full virtual sales kickoff can be conducted at a fraction of the cost of a traditional in-person meeting, with cost savings of over 90% compared to traditional in-person meetings.

Ideally, companies should employ the living sales kickoff strategy that captures the in-person meeting and then builds upon the meeting momentum with follow-on live and recorded events throughout the year. The living sales kickoff facilitates the on-boarding of new hires throughout the year. It also provides salespeople who might not have been able to attend the meeting with the opportunity to get up-to-speed on the latest company news and product information.

Benefits of the Living Sales Kickoff

There are five reasons why more companies are employing the living sales kickoff strategy:

1) To Maximize Meeting Value

Worldwide sales organizations incur considerable expenses flying team members to the meeting location from around the world, renting meeting facilities, hiring meeting planning and production organizations, shipping equipment and booths to the event, and providing lodging, food, and entertainment for attendees.

Let's examine the typical costs associated with conducting an annual sales kickoff for a high-technology company headquartered in the United States. The company has a sales staff of 300, with half the team based internationally. The meeting is being produced by outside event planners, with assistance from the internal marketing team. Here's a breakdown of costs for the three-day meeting:

Air Travel and Ground Transportation	\$175,000
Hotel Lodging	\$150,000
Facilities and Meeting Room Rental	\$30,000
Food and Beverage	\$50,000
Entertainment and Events	\$25,000
Keynote and Industry Speakers	\$25,000
Audiovisual Fees	\$20,000
Event Production and Staffing	\$50,000
Giveaways, Marketing Collateral, and Shipping	\$25,000
Total Costs	\$550,000
Meeting Cost per Attendee	\$1,833

The living sales kickoff strategy essentially leverages the one-time cost and spreads it across many different viewings and meetings throughout the year. As opposed to a "one and done" meeting strategy, ten times the number of attendees, on average, typically view the original sales kickoff meeting. Should the company decide to hold three follow-on quarterly meetings online, the total meeting cost per attendee for all four meetings, including the original sales kickoff, would be approximately \$2,500.

2) To Increase Meeting Content Retention

The typical sales kickoff meeting is a two- to three-day event consisting of a variety of speakers and training sessions. Studies have shown that meeting attendees can recall only 5% of what they heard 72 hours following the meeting. Since the meeting is recorded for future on-demand viewing, the comprehension and retention of the strategies, tactics, and training topics covered are significantly higher.

3) To Facilitate Ongoing Sales Meetings

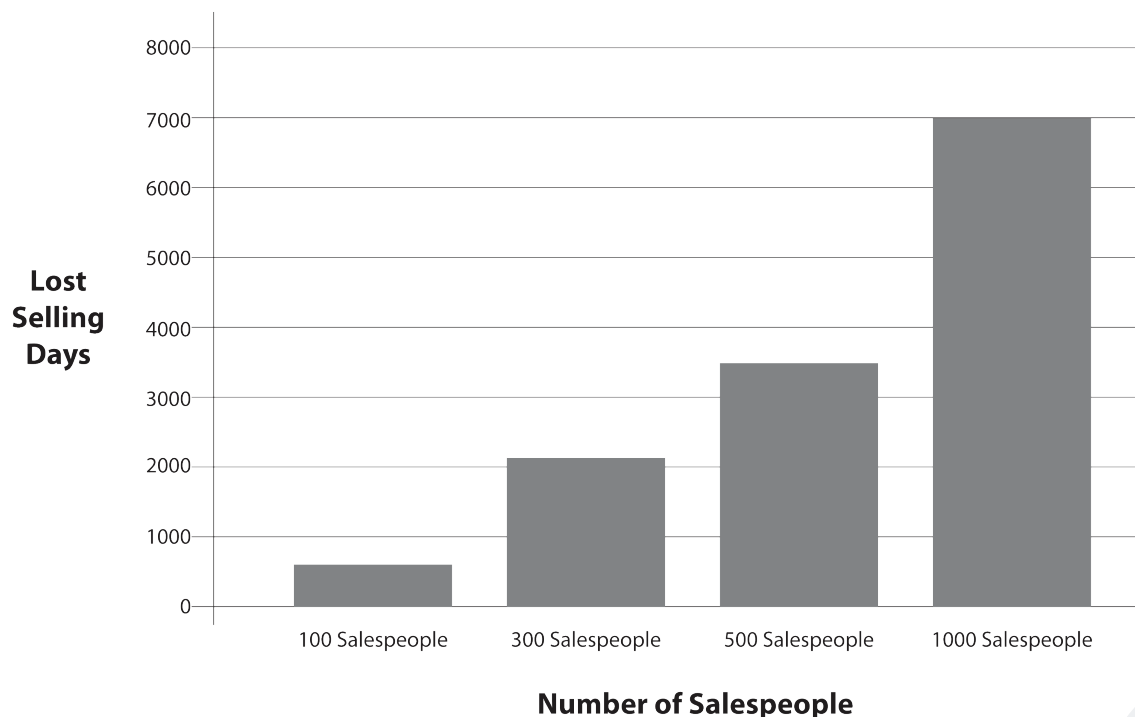
The scheduling flexibility and reduced meeting production time allows for multiple meetings during the year. This enables more frequent sales force strategy updates and competitive strategy reviews to be conducted as needed. In addition, the key sales mission and mantras introduced at the sales kickoff can be continually reinforced.

4) To Conduct New Product Launches and Existing Product Updates

Annual sales kickoffs are typically conducted at the beginning of the fiscal year, and this timing does not always correspond with new product releases. The living sales kickoff provides the ideal delivery platform to conduct new product training and demonstrations, along with interactive reviews of new versions of existing products.

5) To Reduce Lost Selling Days

The time it takes for the sales force to travel to sales meetings is a hidden drain on revenue productivity. The living sales kickoff eliminates the need to travel to follow-on meetings. Using the example above of a U.S.-based company with a sales force of 300 salespeople worldwide, approximately 2,100 selling days would be lost due to associated travel time should the company schedule three additional in-person regional sales meetings. The figure below shows the lost selling time for 300, 500 and 1,000 salespeople.



Living Sales Kickoff Components

A typical living sales kickoff will have five separate online components: virtual ballroom and briefing center for high-definition on-demand webcasts of keynotes and presentations, a virtual sales resource center where sales staff can review product demonstrations and sales training sessions, an exhibitors' hall where business partners show complementary products and related services, a president's club that recognizes outstanding achievements of top salespeople, and a lounge where salespeople can chat with peers.



Within the virtual resource center, team members view different breakout sessions based upon their job functions (such as salespeople, pre-sales engineers, consultants and marketers). These are typically longer “how to” instructional sessions of an hour that show both the presenters and their slides. It includes the ability to submit questions directly to the presenter. Colleagues can also monitor who is in each resource center and interact with one another about the topic. In addition to product training sessions, here are some additional virtual sales resource center sessions to consider:

Salesperson Success Story Panel - One of the most important aspects of the meeting is salespeople sharing their experiences about where they won and why. The best way to accomplish this is through a salesperson interview panel conducted by an experienced moderator.

Customer Case Study Reviews - This session involves a review of how the company's solutions have positively impacted customers, along with strategies to leverage these stories in competitive sales situations.

Customer Presentation Review - Since the customer presentation is one of the most important moments in every sales cycle, it should be reviewed in its entirety with the sales force.

CRM Training - This session helps sales teams use the customer relationship management system to maximize their time and account management efforts.

Elevator Pitch Session - The elevator pitch is a concise message delivered to prospective customers that immediately differentiates you from your competitors.

New Account Penetration Strategy - This session shows advanced techniques to reach new accounts through the use of email, direct mail, cold calls, and referrals.

Product Demonstration Workshop - This is a technical session that shows how to customize a demonstration to emphasize product superiority and highlight distinct advantages.

Technical Competitive Comparison - This is a comprehensive session on technical differences between competitive products that enables the sales organization to make and defend product advantage statements.

Sales Cycle Process Management - The best sales meetings provide the salespeople with models of how customers make their buying decisions from an organizational perspective and how the sales teams should manage and control the sales selection process.

Sales Skills Training - Salespeople don't want to be continually reminded of the sales techniques they already know. They want to learn about the latest advancements in the sales profession for continued personal growth; appropriate topics include advanced sales psychology, sales linguistics, and sales intuition.

Whiteboard Workshop - This session explains how to create rapport and gain the confidence of prospective customers through whiteboard presentations.

Full Virtual Sales Kickoff Meeting Points to Consider

Here are some important points to consider in the event you have to replace your in-person sales kickoff with a virtual meeting. The structure of the full virtual sales kickoff meeting is one of the key factors that determine the meeting's overall success. The agenda should be fast-paced in acknowledgment of the shorter attention spans of the remote attendees. Ideally, it should reinforce a sense of pride in the company and the products that are sold while providing practical knowledge to help close more business. Most importantly, it should generate honest enthusiasm that motivates the sales teams in the field. Here are some points to consider when creating the full virtual sales kickoff meeting agenda:

Audience Engagement. Insert intermittent electronic polls and tests wherever possible so the audience members stay engaged by answering questions and offering their opinions.

Audience Interaction. The audience should be able to submit questions during each presentation, and, depending upon the topic, presenters should allocate a few minutes to answer them at the end of their talk.

Shorter Meeting, Shorter Sessions. A traditional sales kickoff is based upon an eight-hour day of presentations, with each session typically lasting an hour. It's best to shorten both of these times. Don't require viewers to spend the entire day staring at their computer screens. Break the meeting into smaller chunks of 30 to 40 minutes for main session presentations and no more than an hour for more technical training sessions.

Use of Humor. While you never want a meeting to be boring, humor should be used judiciously and kept to a minimum during a virtual sales kickoff. I'd recommend that you solicit humorous contributions directly from the field sales force. For example, you could ask each region to submit its own commercial about the company or have the sales team make a company music video or a video about a day in the life of a salesperson. Turn this into a contest and allow the viewers to pick their favorite online.

Start and End Times. Factor in where the majority of viewers reside when considering meeting start and end times.

Meeting Breaks. Be sure to schedule breaks more frequently than done in in-person meetings. In addition, question-and-answer sessions can serve as breaks for remote viewers who may need them. During formal breaks play inviting music and show a countdown on attendees' desktops so that the audience knows when the program will resume.

Presenter Rehearsal in Full Virtual Meetings. Speaking directly to a video camera for the first time can be unnerving for some people. That's why mandatory rehearsal sessions should be considered for all presenters to ensure they are comfortable presenting in this format.

Below is a sample agenda for a full virtual sales kickoff. The full virtual meeting has the same components as the living sales kickoff meeting (virtual ballroom, virtual resource center, exhibitors' hall, president's club and lounge). The half-day virtual ballroom main session is a live broadcast delivered worldwide to all attendees, regardless of their job function, and recorded for repeated post-meeting review. After attending the virtual ballroom main session, attendees are directed to the virtual resource center to watch sessions at their leisure based upon their job function and area of specialty.

Virtual Ballroom Main Session

A typical living sales kickoff will have five separate online components: virtual ballroom and briefing center for high-definition on-demand webcasts of keynotes and presentations, a virtual sales resource center where sales staff can review product demonstrations and sales training sessions, an exhibitors' hall where business partners show complementary products and related services, a president's club that recognizes outstanding achievements of top salespeople, and a lounge where salespeople can chat with peers.

- Welcome (5 Minutes) – A senior executive kicks off the meeting with a review of the agenda and provides instructions about how attendees can ask the presenters questions and submit their answers to the interactive polls and tests they will be asked to complete.
- Company “State of the Union” (30 Minutes) – The CEO reviews the financial and operational milestones achieved during the past year, a perspective of the company's future, and important developments within the industry.
- Question-and-Answer Break (5-10 Minutes) – Questions submitted by viewers for the CEO are answered.
- Global Sales Review (30 Minutes) – The vice president of sales reviews the prior year results and discusses the successes and challenges along with the goals for the upcoming year. The vice president should also recognize outstanding performers and refer all viewers to the online president's club to learn more about their accomplishments.
- Question-and-Answer Break (5-10 Minutes) – Questions submitted by viewers for the vice president of sales are answered.

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- **Keynote Speaker (30 Minutes)** – In this speaking slot, you want a powerful presenter with an impactful real-world message that delivers value to the meeting. I recommend that you consider only industry mavens and sales experts as opposed to the celebrities such as entertainment stars or sports heroes or pure motivational speakers you might use at a traditional sales kickoff. Industry mavens are analysts and consultants who can talk about current issues and future business trends. Sales experts can share their specific sales-related knowledge with the audience.
 - **Question-and-Answer Break (5-10 Minutes)** – Questions submitted by viewers for the keynote speaker are answered.
 - **Marketing Update (30 Minutes)** – The vice president of marketing presents a high-level update of new marketing programs, lead generation initiatives, industry analyst reviews, and market positioning versus the competition.
 - **Question-and-Answer Break (5-10 Minutes)** – Questions submitted by viewers for the vice president of marketing are answered.
 - **Product Review (30 Minutes)** – Updates on new products, enhancements to the product line, and the future product road map are presented by senior product development leaders. A high-level analysis and comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of major competitive product offerings are reviewed.
 - **Question-and-Answer Break (5-10 Minutes)** – Questions submitted by viewers for the product review presenters are answered.
 - **Departmental Updates (30 Minutes)** – Leaders from the key customer-facing organizations that directly impact sales—such as customer support, consulting, and alliances—make short presentations.
 - **Question-and-Answer Break (5 to 10 Minutes)** – Questions submitted by viewers for the departmental presenters are answered.
 - **Closing Call to Action (15 Minutes)** – The vice president of sales reviews key messages from the day and closes the main session with an appropriate call to action. The vice president then directs users to attend sessions in the virtual sales resource center and visit the exhibitors' hall.

Virtual Sales Kickoff Meeting Vendor Platform Considerations

You should consider several key factors when selecting the vendor you will use to host your virtual sales kickoff meeting. Like any infrastructure technology, the meeting will exist in a 24/7 environment and will be continuously accessed from around the globe. Although many of the leading virtual meeting platforms share some of the same features, there are significant differences between the underlying technologies they use and the capabilities of their organizations.

- **Guaranteed Reliability and Infrastructure Delivery Technology.** The most important factor to consider when selecting a virtual meeting platform is the underlying technical infrastructure, because nothing is worse than a virtual sales kickoff meeting that crashes in front of the entire company. Does the provider offer a state-of-the-art infrastructure delivery technology? Does the company have a fully redundant technology platform that guarantees 100% reliability?
- **Full-Service Provider.** Does the vendor offer full production capabilities, including signal acquisition, hosting, encoding, and distribution? Can it provide graphics and animation creation and template building and customization? Does the company offer multi-language support and a global network of local production crews?
- **Expertise in Your Vertical Industry.** Will your implementation account team be composed of seasoned event managers who are familiar with your industry? Can they offer you best practice recommendations based upon their similar experiences within your industry?

Closing Thoughts

When I was a vice president of sales, one of my key responsibilities was to ensure that our sales kickoff meeting was a complete success. I wanted everyone to leave the meeting trained on our new products, well-versed about the competition, and, most importantly, re-energized to get back into the field and sell. Today, the virtual sales kickoff meeting environment offers an entirely new state-of-the-art platform to achieve these goals without the sales teams having to leave their offices.

About Steve W. Martin

Steve W. Martin is the founder of the Heavy Hitter sales philosophy and the foremost expert on “sales linguistics,” the study of how customers use language during the complex decision-making process. The Heavy Hitter sales philosophy has helped more than 100,000 salespeople become top revenue producers at leading companies around the world. Martin’s latest book is titled *Heavy Hitter Sales Linguistics: 101 Advanced Sales Call Strategies for Senior Salespeople*. Please visit www.heavyhitterwisdom.com for more information.