

How the Forgetting Curve Saps Sales Effectiveness

*Understanding and Overcoming
the Top Barrier to Sales Learning*

Introduction

Sales training initiatives frequently fall short of the goal because of a well-researched phenomenon known as “the forgetting curve.” However, simple and proven techniques exist to overcome this challenge and deliver the sales effectiveness improvements leaders and trainers seek. This white paper describes the science behind why people forget so much of what they learn in training. It then reviews eight data-driven techniques organizations can employ to reinforce learning so that sales training will lead to better customer conversations.

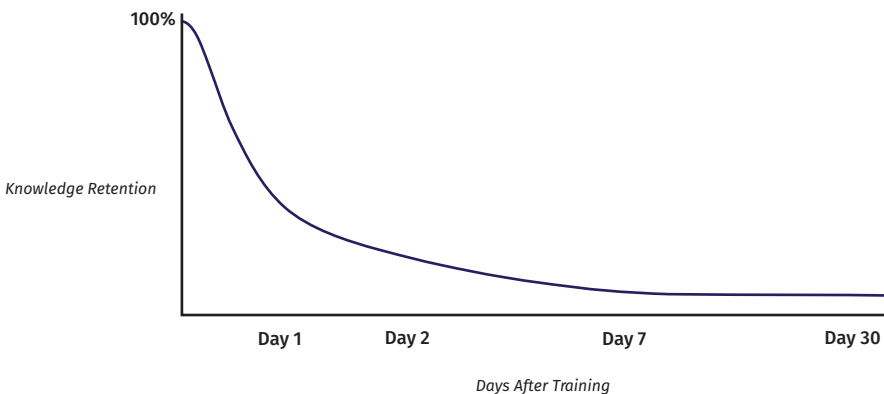
The Sales Training Challenge

Companies spend billions every year to train their sales forces, yet an incredible 96% of the sales professionals we surveyed last year felt their training was ineffective.¹ How can this be? Given the time and money invested, it’s not a question of effort or expense. Rather, the fundamental problem is in many cases baked into the very structure of the way so much sales training is delivered: in intense yet infrequent bursts, such as with yearly sales kick-offs, or through lengthy, one-size-fits-all eLearning courses provided through corporate learning management systems. These approaches don’t match the way people learn and aren’t suited to the unique needs of the sales function.

Bringing geographically dispersed teams together is expensive. A Verizon study showed the average day-long meeting involving five people of whom four have to travel costs roughly \$5,000². This means a typical five day national sales meeting with 200 people can cost \$1,000,000. This compounds the often greater opportunity cost of taking reps out of the field for training, which routinely runs in excess of \$10,000 per rep.³ If these traditional methods led to successful learning outcomes, they would be worth the investment. But evidence reveals that on their own, they often do not.⁴ Sales reps consistently forget important information delivered to them.

This lack of knowledge retention is the function of a widely studied phenomenon originally discovered and developed into a theory in 1885 by a German psychologist named Hermann Ebbinghaus,⁵ eventually dubbed “The Forgetting Curve.”⁶

The Forgetting Curve



Absent reinforcement, the retention of newly acquired knowledge fades quickly

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Research and empirical evidence demonstrates that knowledge retention steadily declines in the absence of continued exposure. As much as 50 to 80 percent of material can be lost as soon as the day after initial exposure, and up to 98 percent within 30 days.⁷ Even if sales reps understand everything they learn during a training session, by the time it comes to actively apply it in a selling situation, they'll have forgotten most of it.

Baseline training courses put new information into a learner's short-term memory. But without a conscious effort to retain it, the person's ability to recall the information disappears over time.⁸ People easily remember the facts and concepts they focus on frequently, yet just as easily forget what they touch upon only once or twice.⁹ A healthy mind actually depends upon this "forgetfulness"; we wouldn't want to waste space in our long-term memory encoding information we aren't going to use.

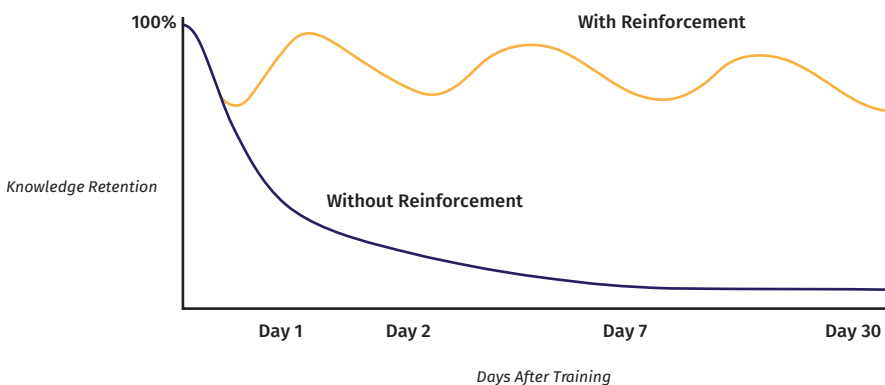
But if the forgetting curve represents the function of a normal, healthy mind, what can sales leaders and learning and development professionals do to combat it?

Overcoming the Forgetting Curve

Developments in learning research and computer automation have opened the way for several proven, practical solutions for overcoming the forgetting curve.¹⁰

Reinforce New Learning – A technique involving the periodic reinforcement of new learning, called spaced repetition, combats the forgetting curve by moving new knowledge into long-term memory. The brain determines which information is most important by registering how often it's presented. So the more we revisit a given fact or concept, the more we strengthen the information pathways (synapses) in the brain for future recall.¹¹ Information moves from the brain's prefrontal cortex to the high-capacity, long-term memory of the hippocampus, where increasingly less effort and time is needed to activate it for later retrieval.

The Forgetting Curve



Regular reinforcement of newly acquired knowledge improves retention

Learners can virtually eliminate the forgetting curve by repeatedly revisiting new material in small pieces spread over time with gradually increasing time intervals added between review sessions. This is the most efficient way to establish the neural pathways for long-term memory. While new, unfamiliar material might be reviewed

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daily at first, subsequent reinforcement sessions of that material can be spread over increasingly longer periods without reducing effectiveness.

Reinforcement of new information within 24 hours can raise retention levels to nearly where they were immediately following initial exposure. Furthermore, drastic reductions in time spent reviewing material over subsequent days and weeks doesn't impact data recall and fluency if done consistently.¹² Studies show a 30 to 55 percent improvement in knowledge recall when using spaced repetition over a single, point-in-time learning event. And the impact lasts, holding as long as two years.¹³

Organize Information Into Bite-sized Pieces – Presenting information in small chunks reduces cognitive load,¹⁴ eases the perceived burden of learning, and gives learners a sense of empowerment.¹⁵ Microlearning describes any learning model that operates on the principle that people learn more effectively if content is broken into smaller units and delivered in short sessions. Since learners can review information on their own schedule and in accordance with their own attention span, it's much easier for them to engage frequently throughout a busy week – even if for only few minutes between meetings or phone calls.

Engage Multiple Senses – The more senses engaged in the act of learning, the higher the retention. Multimodal learning refers to a set of techniques that use multiple representations of information such as text, audio and visuals.¹⁶ Research shows¹⁷ using words and pictures over words alone improves retention.¹⁸ Students learn even more effectively when audio is included in the mix.¹⁹

Video is especially powerful because it incorporates multiple modalities. Humans evolved with a huge visual bias; we process visual information 60,000 times faster than text.²⁰ The majority of people agree that videos convey more powerful messages than text alone, and most would rather watch a video about something than read about it. When people hear information, they usually only recall 10 percent of it three days later. However, adding visuals increases the information retention rate to 65 percent. Learning experiences that use visual aids and/or video maximize audience engagement and retention.

Leverage the Testing Effect – Testing learners on material and giving immediate feedback increases retention.²¹ This phenomenon is known as the Testing Effect. Students who spend 7 minutes studying and 7 minutes being tested have better recall a week later than students who spend their entire 14 minutes only studying the material. Research on learning and memory shows that retrieval of the information learned must be considered when thinking about optimizing learning. The mind doesn't store static “snapshots” of information to be retrieved and produced verbatim.²² Instead, knowledge is, in a sense, *reconstructed* based on “retrieval cues.” Testing serves a dual purpose: to measure a person's knowledge, as well as to improve long-term retention by forcing them to practice retrieving the information.

Personalize It – Learners better remember material when it's personalized for them. Studies show that using personalization increases a person's enjoyment level²³ and thereby engenders intrinsic motivation. This leads to significant increases in the quality and quantity of interactions the person will have with whatever learning activity is assigned to them²⁴, thereby yielding higher levels of learning achieved.

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Incorporate Gamification – Bringing gamification principles into the learning process leverages people’s desire to compete. Game-like techniques take many forms: awarding points, achievement badges, and levels; displaying leaderboards or progress; or giving feedback or rewards. Many studies show positive effects on learning when using gamification techniques, mainly attributable to increased motivation, engagement, and enjoyment for learners.²⁵ Automatic and immediate feedback encourages and stimulates learners to higher levels of achievement. Real-time leaderboards increase social awareness and challenge learners to compete against one another.

Facilitate Interactive Exercises – There is a lot of truth to the old adage, “Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand.” The previously mentioned techniques fill the roles of “tell me” and “show me,” but interactive learning provides the “involve me.” Interactive learning describes any learning methodology that features face-to-face interaction as an important component of the learning process.²⁶ Studies show that people who undergo face-to-face interaction during learning experience greater improvements in problem solving and overall outcomes than those who don’t.²⁷ Involving learners in interactive role play and other means of active practice strengthens synaptic connections and drives knowledge deeper into the mind.²⁸

Supplement with Just-In-Time Learning – While reinforcement learning overcomes the forgetting curve, just-in-time learning bypasses it entirely by eliminating the time gap between learning and use. No matter how effective an organization’s training is, there are limits to the amount of knowledge a person can absorb.²⁹ Ubiquitous access to rich media via mobile devices means salespeople no longer need to be trained on every message, customer story, and objection response. Instead, just-in-time learning gives them easy access to that information at the exact time of need. For example, sitting in their car before meeting a prospect, a rep can watch a short video about the particular segment of buyer they’re about to encounter, perhaps recorded by an experienced peer, and be effectively armed with the most important aspects of value to emphasize.

Conclusion

Once sales learning professionals understand how the forgetting curve erodes the effectiveness of episodic training, they can quickly put in place proven measures to overcome it. Building on a foundation of traditional training, they can reinforce newly acquired knowledge and enable just-in-time learning at the time and place reps need it in order to deliver the improved sales behaviors that managers seek. Doing so also makes training more convenient, engaging and even enjoyable for the salespeople being trained.

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About Allego

Allego provides an intuitive sales learning platform that boosts sales performance by harnessing the power of mobile devices to transform enablement and training through video content sharing. With Allego's mobile-first platform, organizations can create and curate the best content from the field and corporate office to better train and collaborate with sales teams, without the time and expense typically associated with in-field coaching or on-site training. Users can easily access relevant, quality content, anytime, anywhere, allowing them to capture their best ideas, master their pitch and accelerate their performance. Tens of thousands of global users across a range of industries have adopted Allego to improve sales success. Explore further at www.allego.com.