

The Professional's Choice

Selling financial products and services to end users through intermediaries is a long and complex process. By implementing Miller Heiman's Conceptual Selling® programme Clerical Medical aims to have a better understanding of the motivations of both parties and make every sales call count.

As the name suggests, Clerical Medical's customer base is made up largely of professional people. Part of the Halifax Group, it provides a range of tailored savings products and services including pensions, mortgages and investments. These are sold exclusively through Independent Financial Advisers (IFAs).

Serving the IFA community are three regional teams of Sales Consultants and a central telemarketing department, all acknowledged for high levels of technical competence. Their success in securing new business pushed funds under management to £69b in 2001. Nevertheless, the company felt it would benefit from reviewing its approach to planning, implementing and assessing sales calls.

Sales cycles within the financial services industry reflect the long-term nature of the products being sold. Since Clerical Medical's business model relies on the professionalism and expertise of intermediaries, the sales process is not only lengthy but also more complex.

Decision-making is a case in point. This may be relatively straightforward where advisers work either independently or in small groups. However, larger IFA organisations set up panels to determine the products they sell, which entails dealing with multiple decision-makers. Consequently it can

take several sales calls for the process to come to fruition. In these meetings Consultants not only have to get grips with the intermediary's business goals but also need to understand the end user's concept - their ambitions, goals and attitude to risk.

To address these issues Clerical Medical had previously introduced a relationship management programme.

But the company recognised that it would need a different approach if it was going to build on what had been achieved

Whereas the original system looked at strategic issues of prior positioning, the key objective now was to manage individual sales calls as effectively as possible. This covered understanding why customers really buy, setting objectives and action targets for each visit, and gathering the necessary information to position the Clerical Medical solution and gain the customer's commitment.

"One of the biggest challenges was winning over a highly experienced and competent sales force," says Learning Consultant, Lawrence Emm. "We knew the sales process would have to be robust, flexible and sophisticated enough to be able to add value." Having evaluated several solutions

Clerical Medical chose Miller Heiman's 'Conceptual Selling®' programme. It not only fulfilled these criteria but, having been tried and tested over twenty years, had the necessary credibility.

"There are around 250 sales consultants up and down the country. They are all highly qualified but some have particular expertise in pensions and UK or international investments. In any given sales situation it's up to the Regional Consultants - the equivalent of key account managers - to co-ordinate these specialists and any other company resources needed to win the business.

"We wanted a way of streamlining this process and also of transferring successful approaches between different offices. Sales people are naturally protective of their own working methods. So although the company was doing well, we were being held back from achieving certain business goals and from capitalising on the relationship management programme" explains Lawrence.

Clerical Medical had no direct experience of Miller Heiman, but the programme had been recommended by an independent contact with personal experience of the financial services industry. After attending a two-day open workshop Lawrence was convinced of the programme's validity and that it would meet the company's business and financial objectives.

Local Ownership

Rolling out Conceptual Selling® to all regional sales offices and the central telemarketing department, via a series of workshops, has established a clearly defined and consistent framework across the entire operation. The sales force has

reacted positively to the renewed emphasis on sales skills. One reason is that Miller Heiman's process is accepted as being both logical and repeatable, but Lawrence acknowledges that the company has learnt from its previous implementation experience.

"It is important that Conceptual Selling® is not perceived purely as a sales training initiative. So although we have handled the technical delivery ourselves we are also working closely with sales management who understand what is feasible at a local level. How they drive the process forward - for example, in what circumstances they will use it and the type of records they will keep - is up to them," he explains.

By devolving responsibility to regional sales management, the aim is to create a greater sense of ownership and to constantly refresh the process.

This approach is already paying off in day-to-day sales activities.

Miller Heiman terms like 'Valid Business Reason' and 'Minimal Acceptable Action' have become part of everyday language - even arousing the interest of staff in other departments. At sales meetings teams review the different sales situations by completing Green Sheets - the analysis mechanism integral to Conceptual Selling®. Using a paper-based system initially has helped to foster collaborative working, but the company also plans to make it available on the computer network.

The long-term aim is for Conceptual Selling® to become the bedrock of the way Clerical Medical does business by creating a positive information flow and building a mutual commitment to success. However, because of the long sales cycle the

company recognises that it will take time for the benefits to translate into business performance. In the meantime, each sales team has a practical framework for action and defined timescales for reviewing progress.

With the initial roll-out now complete, attention has turned to ensuring that the sales process becomes part of the corporate culture.

The priorities identified so far include developing e-learning initiatives, presenting the process to new starters, and rolling it out to the other functions that support IFAs. Responding to feedback from local sales groups, Lawrence's team is also producing tools to develop questioning skills and coach people.

In addition to these internal requirements, industry trends are also shaping the role Conceptual Selling® plays within the organisation. For example, currently IFA's are free to search the market for the most appropriate solution, but need indemnity insurance because they can be sued for making the wrong decision. The possibility that in future IFAs may be tied to a limited number of products raises fundamental questions about how they run their businesses and this, in turn, will impact the support services Clerical Medical offers. A sales process that creates a better understanding of intermediaries and their goals can only strengthen the company's ability to capitalise on new opportunities in a rapidly changing market.