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Opinion

Fixing the Broken Wholesaler Training Model

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Advisors are more spread out and mobile than ever before, making it easier for them to get information and support that they once relied on wholesalers to deliver on demand. How we train our wholesalers must change in response.

The traditional training model for external wholesalers usually includes a drinking-from-the-fire-hose approach with too much information about too many products and messages. Once the training ends, few firms have formal assessments or certification processes by which wholesalers demonstrate they are ready to start talking to advisors. Wholesalers are typically not taught how to ask better questions or articulate the value they can provide based on advisors' needs.

During the wholesaler's early days in the field, there is typically little strategic interaction between the external wholesaler and the internal who covers the same territory. This leaves the external stuck with the task of learning, one appointment at a time. In addition, there is rarely a system in place to provide the follow-up necessary to improve. Learning to be a great wholesaler requires coaching and practice.

Here are three ways to adjust the wholesaler training model.

Think 'Mobile First'

Some firms believe that by simply providing their teams with iPads they are capitalizing on the mobility trend; however, having the device is just the beginning. The process of curating applications to ensure they have the right information is critical. Wholesalers waste as much as 20% of their time looking for information. A well-organized, mobile structure with a search function keeps critical data at their fingertips.

Some firms allow wholesaling teams to share more ideas and marketing materials at a faster pace by using video-based training and systems to allow sharing peer-generated content. Such methods allow managers to share ideas more quickly with their entire teams, and provide on-demand remote coaching. Additionally, these apps allow valuable content to be accessed on- or offline, which is critical, because wholesalers do not always have access to Wi-Fi when they are on the go.

Internal Wholesalers Need to be Real Partners

Internals play a crucial role in reaching advisors in the territory, especially when it's hard for externals to get appointments. Internals and externals should attend the same training sessions, so they can meet face-to-face and develop relationships. This helps improve communication and ensure that advisors don't get spammed with duplicate messages.

In this training, internals and externals should work together so they can ensure they are delivering a consistent message about specific funds or categories. At **Pioneer Investments**, for example, internals and externals collaborate to create product presentations. Managers then provide feedback to help wholesalers understand and practice the message they plan to deliver. This helps prepare internals to answer the tough questions, such as how a firm handles fund manager succession. This collaborative relationship is important to ensuring they are answering these questions in a way that is consistent with externals.

Less Is More

Managers also need to adapt to this new landscape and learn to create a culture where wholesalers can learn from their peers. Sales managers are increasingly being asked to do more with less, and often are trying to protect their wholesalers from information overload.

The manager can help limit the deluge by breaking the important knowledge into bite-size chunks that can be reinforced. They can do this by having follow-up conversations after classes or during one-on-one ride-alongs with their wholesalers. Managers can customize

training by focusing their feedback based on the behavior and reactions observed during advisor appointments. Using a coaching checklist and a standardized scoring system is a simple way to rank areas that need improvement. It also helps the manager show the wholesaler the progress they are making over time.

Wholesalers should echo the less-is-more approach when sharing information with clients. At **Touchstone Investments**, for example, divisional managers randomly pair internals with externals to craft pitches for specific funds. This forces wholesalers to think in terms of short messages. Managers play critical roles in reminding wholesalers to answer the “so what?” question regarding any message they convey. This process helps distill the message to keep the conversation brief and to the point.

Why Does It Matter?

While technology can help solve some of the biggest challenges in the broken model of traditional sales training and coaching that exist today, it's not the entire solution. Sales managers who help orchestrate strategic interactions between internals and externals, and who offer specific feedback and follow-up, are the ones who are helping their wholesalers adapt and thrive.