

## Sales and Leadership Training for All Industries



**Kevin Higgins - CEO**

### **About Fusion Learning Inc.**

Fusion Learning Inc. is one of North America's fastest-growing sales effectiveness firms. Fusion is in the business of aligning individual and team sales efforts with overall strategy, enabling leaders to instill more discipline and accountability in customer-facing professionals, and developing sales and service skills that produce results.

**Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine**

### **CEOCFO: Mr. Higgins, would you tell us the concept behind Fusion Learning?**

**Mr. Higgins:** Fusion Learning is a sales performance firm, so we help organizations around sales effectiveness. We look at how they can close more profitable business, how they can shorten their sales cycle, and how they can increase the activity levels of their sales people. The way that we help organizations is through training — both sales training and leadership training.

### **CEOCFO: What are some of the more common areas where people fall short?**

**Mr. Higgins:** One area is around the whole notion of sales management; sales leaders often tell their sales managers that they need to get more performance out of their teams. That is the 'what' but they do not help them with the 'how', which is around how to run great sales meetings that build skill and motivation. The how is about how you have a pipeline review that looks at what your sales team has in the pipeline and how they can increase either the velocity through the pipeline or the amount that is in the pipeline. Recently, we conducted some research around the sales force itself and the skills of the sales force. We surveyed 120 companies; we separated the average companies in the survey from the best, taking the top 3% via performance metrics. We thought we would see that the sales force was much better in the top 3 percent. We found that they did not have a different sales force at all. The average companies — all 120 — rated their sales force as equal to what the best companies had. One huge area of focus we see is the sales force is not prepared enough and is not performing as well as they could be. The average score across 8 competencies was 5.8 out of 10 for the sales force.

### **CEOCFO: How do you go about teaching?**

**Mr. Higgins:** The old adage is you are born a sales person; could it be a learned behavior? Oftentimes we think of great sales people as sort of outgoing people who are talkative and can easily make friends. Many studies prove that an introvert can be as strong a sales person as an extrovert and that is not the differentiator. Instead, it is that there are disciplines to selling. There is a consultative discipline, a negotiation discipline, a prospecting discipline and an account management discipline (or strategic account management). There are presentation skills and the ability to use stories in selling. All of these can be taught and learned so you absolutely can create great sales people — they are not just born that way.

### **CEOCFO: How do you teach someone to be comfortable with an approach that they may know intellectually is the way to do it but does not come naturally for them?**

**Mr. Higgins:** Our belief is that people have to see what is in it for them. Simply saying 'Hey, this is a better way' and showing it is better will not be enough; you have to show them this is a better way and here is what you will get if you were to do this. Whenever we think about a sales leader and helping them around coaching, many times it is around how do you listen more and talk less in coaching. You have to show them that if you listen more and talk less, your sales people will believe more because they are creating it and then there is a better chance of action. It is actually the same issue at the sales level: how to get sales people to talk less and listen more because what their clients create they will believe in and enact. You have to show the sales people if they talk less and listen more their sales results will go up; sales leaders show them how, and in coaching, talking less and listening more so that their sales people perform better.

**CEOCFO: You have a variety of programs for different niches in the sales area. Would you give us an example of one or two engagements?**

**Mr. Higgins:** We will often engage with an organization that is saying ‘we do not have a strong enough sales culture’; ‘we have a good service culture but not a strong enough sales culture.’ ‘We take care of our customers but we do not necessarily maximize the opportunities with them.’ We have seen this in financial institutions, banks, credit unions and insurance companies. We see it in contact centers where we are getting the inbound service calls but how do we take the opportunity to also cross-sell and up-sell? The client will come to us with this service-to-sales opportunity; how we will engage with them is called one plus one equals three. Our view is we have to work with your sales and service leaders, managers or supervisors. We also have to work with your front line sales and service people. We could just work with the front line or we could just work with the sales leaders, which is the one plus one — or we could work with them together and help to change the sales management discipline and change the sales discipline. The combination of the two will lead to maximum results.

**CEOCFO: Do you find many companies come to you proactively or after a crisis?**

**Mr. Higgins:** I always say there are two times when organizations really invest in their people. The first is when sales organizations are doing well. They invest because they say ‘we like where we are and we want to invest in our people.’ The other time is when they are doing poorly and are behind their sales numbers; they have to somehow get there with the people they have, so they are going to have to invest in them. It is not that those are the only times but those are two main times.

**“Fusion is a great partner for organizations that want to improve sales performance. We will keep it practical and simple and we will help you dramatically improve your sales performance.” - Kevin Higgins**

**CEOCFO: What does Fusion understand that perhaps others that provide a similar service do not?**

**Mr. Higgins:** Sales training has been around a long time but our belief is that there is an acceptance in the training community that good training is fine; if we go in and do a good job and at the end the people say that was good then that is an acceptable level of performance. Our view is that would be a disappointment. Our view is if a company invests with us and we engage their people, they should say our training was excellent and that was the best training they ever had. That is what we constantly strive for and what we achieve. The way we achieve this is that the facilitators in the classroom need to be world-class. If we find a good facilitator, we tell them in advance we will not hire you; you have to be a world-class facilitator in order to be on our team because that is the value proposition that we give to our clients. Twenty thousand participants took our programs last year and they rated our facilitators 4.8 out of 5 on the ability to engage them in the learning. The second is the actual content. You have to have a person that brings the content to life, so it needs to be very practical and simple. Sometimes in training or learning or leadership development, people are looking for the complex model or the neat and shiny object. What we say is that it is really about blocking and tackling--taking the complex and making it simple and practical. We want anyone who takes a Fusion Learning program to be able to implement it the next day; and if they cannot implement it the next day it is not going to be in our program.

**CEOCFO: For your staff in general, what are the intangibles you look for and how do you know?**

**Mr. Higgins:** I do not think you do know. I wrote a book called *Engage Me*. One of the chapters talks about hiring and how we go about hiring at Fusion. Job simulations are typically only used in about 20 percent of hiring decisions and to me they are critical. We have to see them in action doing what it is we would expect them to do. The reason is many people look and talk smart, but when it comes time to do it they cannot and they struggle. When we hire facilitators, we do a phone screening of them, and have a one-on-one interview with them; if they pass both of those, we then have them do a behavioral test. If they pass that, they get to come in and do a demonstration in front of eight people. We find many people who pass the first two levels come into the third level as very good but not world-class. I think you have to invest a lot to find world-class.

**CEOCFO: When Fusion is talking to a prospective client is there a typical aha moment when they understand the depth and the practicality portion?**

**Mr. Higgins:** We hope to get to those and we often do get those, but I would not say that we always do. In organizations that are learning and growing, I think the aha comes out, but in organizations that actually feel good and feel like they are ahead of the curve it is hard sometimes to show that maybe we have something that could help them.

**CEOCFO: Are there other typical industries and typical sizes that would tend to use your services or areas where you would like to have greater inroads?**

**Mr. Higgins:** Our belief is we can help companies across industries. We do not pick out one industry or one vertical focus. It is about how we can manage better and how we can interface with our clients better, and that is where we find we can be helpful.

**CEOCFO: *Would you tell us more about your book?***

**Mr. Higgins:** It is called *Engage Me*. It was released in October last year. It is a practical sales management book that talks about sales culture and sales management. It is a how-to guide — so it is not theoretical but very practical. It breaks down how to run an effective sales meeting that will energize your team and build those skills. It breaks down how to conduct a one-on-one. It talks about the four kinds of pipelines, how to recognize what type your sales people have and how you can have a fifteen-minute coaching session with them that will help them over time to improve their pipeline. It is available in hardcover on Amazon, as well as in e-book format.

**CEOCFO: *How do you reach out for potential customers and how do companies find Fusion?***

**Mr. Higgins:** We believe in using a direct sales force to reach other sales organizations. We have a direct sales team of ten people with three in the US and seven in Canada. We believe in being in touch with our clients in a value-add way, so we are sharing white papers, ideas, videos and the latest thinking on sales. Clients contact us by phone, email and through our website. We believe a lot these days in videos versus written works, so we have a large video presence that connects to YouTube; many people find us by viewing one of our videos, which links them to our website.

**CEOCFO: *Why was Fusion Learning named one of Canada's top fifty small and medium-sized employers?***

**Mr. Higgins:** In the book, we talk about our sales culture and relate this story: one day we were thinking about how to get an award. We say we do a lot for our people. I came up with the idea of what we do as Fusion's A to Z. In the book I've actually published the A to Z of what we do for our team in terms of supporting them, growing them and developing them. Our main thing is we believe in our people and our saying is: if you want a good company, you hire good people and if you want a great company, you hire great people. We aspire to have a team of entirely great people. We coach, develop and provide feedback and support. At the end of the day if a person cannot be at that level then we will say this is not the right place for you. We end up with a high-performance team and we get there by support, coaching and development, as well as making it a fun place to work.

**CEOCFO: *Are you surprised so many people do not understand that concept?***

**Mr. Higgins:** Many of our clients are in the Fortune 500 and we are a small-medium business. I think it is easy at the small-medium business level; we can offer new things and move on initiatives more quickly. These efforts are expensive but in the grand scheme of things, it does not add up to such a large number. I think it is harder in a global organization. We created a special version of the book for a client, with copies going to 1200 bank branches; we had to remove a chapter on performance reviews. I have a very good system for performance reviews, which would not fit in an organization like theirs with 80,000 employees. What I had was a very good system, which, if they implemented it, would dramatically change the way they are going about performance reviews in their organization. I am not surprised that it is hard for some people to create great cultures in large organizations — I am surprised that they use that as an excuse and a roadblock. Having regular occasions where you get your team together and celebrate success without spending a great deal of money is something that any size organization can do, yet there are all kinds of large organizations that just do not do that or they do it once a year when it should be once a week.

**CEOCFO: *Why pay attention to Fusion Learning?***

**Mr. Higgins:** Fusion is a great partner for organizations that want to improve sales performance. We will keep it practical and simple and we will help you dramatically improve your sales performance.

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**BIO:** Kevin Higgins, CEO of Fusion Learning, takes pride in his great team and the sales performance improvements they help to make in their clients' organizations. Kevin describes himself as a "business person working in training, not a training person trying to figure out business." Kevin's book *Engage Me* was published in October 2013.

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