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TRAINING WHEELS

TO GET THE NATION'S RETAILERS UP TO SPEED ON NEW PRODUCTS, MANUFACTURERS SEND THEIR PRODUCT 'SPIN-TEAMS' OUT ON THE ROAD BY MICAH SHEVELOFF

Studies of retail operations have indicated that salespeople gravitate toward selling certain products if they understand the key features and how they benefit the consumer, and consciously avoid the items on the sales floor that they are less knowledgeable about. No salesperson wants to appear unprepared in the presence of a customer. Operating within these parameters, makers of 12-volt consumer electronics products have devoted tremendous resources to the training and education of their precious link to the consumer: The salesperson.

"Sony places a high degree of importance on training its dealers, who are on the front lines presenting Sony car stereo products to consumers," reported Gary Schilling, technical training manager for Sony's mobile electronics division. "We do what is called a key-city training tour starting in March, and our trainers hit about 50 cities in a two-month period. Our staff is small, and they must remain quite focused," said Schilling. The trainers set up in a hotel, treat the attending salespeople and installers to a nice dinner, and then highlight the product direction for the upcoming season. "We give the salespeople a story to tell, and teach them things that are not necessarily in the product literature," explained Schilling. "The sessions focus on the really important features and concepts that distinguish the new product line,

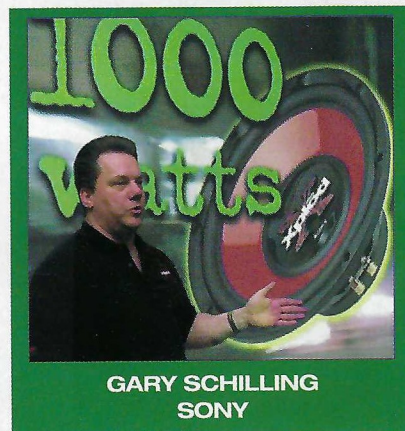
contained within a two-hour presentation," he added. The key-city tour is open to all Sony dealers; however, most of the attendees represent the smaller, independent retailers. The large regional and national accounts have their own training programs, within which Sony integrates its presentations and materials.

In order to prepare timely training materials for newly introduced Sony models, the training staff at Sony works closely with the product planning group, keeping in touch with what innovations are being considered even before they become a reality. Once the plans are finalized and the units are being manufactured, the training crew begins the task of preparing educational materials.

TRAINING ON DVD

One of the tools used by Sony during the key-city seminar is a DVD Video highlighting the products, technology, and key features. Once the training sessions are completed, Sony sends a copy of the training disk to each retailer for future reference. In addition to the key-city tour, the Sony Tech Center in New Jersey is constantly doing research on product integration and specific vehicle applications. This information becomes available to authorized retailers through the tech hotline, various written materials, and the Sony dealer Web site. The site offers retailers access to product infor-

mation, technical specifications, subwoofer application guidance, and new-



GARY SCHILLING
SONY

product wiring instructions. With the efforts of the training crew, the tech center and the Web site, Sony retailers have the resources available to insure that they are intimately acquainted with the products they present.

THE ALPINE REGIMEN

Alpine also prepares a unique regimen in an effort to capture the attention of its retailers. "For training to work, it must contain more than the manufacturer's message. It must be in tune with the culture of each store it is presented to," explained Alpine vice president Steve Witt. "Alpine develops a marketing strategy based on three components of a basic framework: Brand positioning, product lineup, and key values of the new products," said Witt. "We use these three components

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to guide our training and marketing strategy for the coming year, educating our retailers and installers to best represent what Alpine products can do for the consumer," he added.

Witt also emphasized the importance of realizing that within Alpine's distribution channels, the needs for support vary. During the process of introducing a product line, the staff at Alpine performs a needs-analysis evaluation, individually fine-tuning training efforts for the independent A/V retailer, the large chain retailer, the regional chain stores, and the 12-volt specialist. This categorization of retailers allows Witt and his crew to tailor a message that highlights key points for each group of retailers, and focus on what differentiates the Alpine products from those of its competitors.

Witt has a simple philosophy regarding the curriculum: "Make the training relevant!" The trainers seek to find a balance between technology and product value, allowing the salespeople to be educated without being overburdened. There are supplemental materials provided to retailers as well, including an interactive CD-ROM, product-specific videos, and printed materials that are distributed in the field by Alpine product-application specialists, who cover the country on a regional basis. "Whenever possible, we bring along our product displays and demonstration vehicles to the training sessions in order to emphasize brand direction and show off the potential of our



AN ALPINE ROAD SHOW

new models," added Witt.

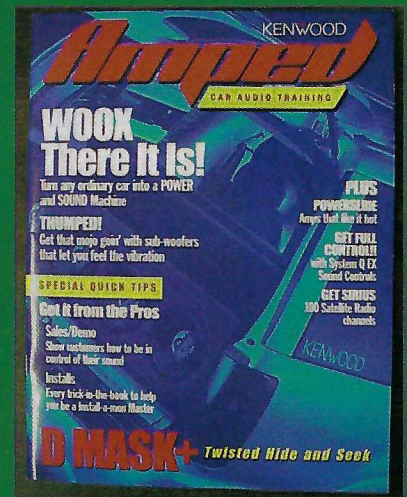
Understanding the behavior of the salesperson is critically important to

delivering a competent training seminar, contends Witt. "There must be an entertainment factor, keeping the audience interested and involved. A one-way delivery does not work." Traditionally, Alpine holds its regional training sessions in a hotel facility, providing an enjoyable meal along with an opportunity for local retailers to interact with factory personnel.

Kenwood national training manager Rick Noetzli reported that retailers are asking for more sales information rather than an in-depth technical understanding of the products. "Salespeople have said that they want the tools to be able to close the sale, or a better understanding of how to point consumers toward the correct Kenwood component," explained Noetzli. Kenwood training seminars are conducted from February to June of each year, based upon new-product introductions at the CES. Three regional training managers and two product specialists cover each territory. "We do a short PowerPoint presentation covering the critical new features and breakthrough technologies," Noetzli said, "but we try to be as interactive as possible during the sessions."

KENWOOD'S 'AMPED'

One technique that Kenwood has found to be a successful supplement to its training program is the use of a camera, projecting various product images up on a big-screen for all in attendance to see clearly. "It is helpful in explaining electronic menus or how to activate a particular feature," added Noetzli. Another unique vehicle that Kenwood uses to supplement their training efforts is the yearly publication called *AMPed*, a magazine-style information booklet that goes out to authorized Kenwood dealers across the country. "The *AMPed* magazine gives us an opportunity to provide technical information to our retailers, along with some comical stuff along the way. The colorful magazine is intended to be an entertaining resource for the salespeople and installers," Noetzli explained. Kenwood is also exploring the use of on-line training as a viable tool, creating a lesson plan for sales and installa-



KENWOOD'S TRAINING MAGAZINE

tion personnel. There will be a quiz on the lessons covered, and possible rewards for registered users who demonstrate improved product knowledge.

New products that are quite involved, such as the recently introduced Kenwood DVD-based navigation system, will be supported by additional product-specific training sessions. Kenwood plans to tour the country in an effort to educate its retailers on this category separate from the rest of the Kenwood product line. The training will be available to retailers who have decided to support the navigation products, and the tour will also be supplemented by an on-line training initiative that will earn the retailer a certificate of accomplishment to display on their wall.

If comfort level equals improved sales performance, Sony, Alpine and Kenwood have shared three approaches that they use to insure that retail salespeople are not avoiding their wares due to a lack of understanding. Training is a form of communication, and each company is trying to reinforce their mission statement and branding efforts in the course of an evening session. The added contact between retailer and manufacturer is often the greatest teacher, as perspectives are shared and questions lead to discussion. The value of training the retailer can only be measured by the success of the products and the consumer awareness that leads to precious long-term brand equity. 