



**“The seemingly impossible had been achieved – a huge improvement in sales revenue whilst retaining the Virgin ethos of delivering service excellence.”**

In a challenging economic climate businesses tend to cut costs, with the first casualties being training, development and change management initiatives. There were no such negative knee jerk reactions at Virgin Atlantic Airways (VAA). They believed it was more positive and much less risky to invest in a long-term change programme to grow future revenue.

Aside from an industry-wide market downturn, VAA had serious cultural challenges to overcome. Customer service was paramount to the Virgin brand, but a lack of sales focus made it hard to balance service with sales. The conversion rate on sales calls had been static at 6% for two years. Senior management set their sights on an increase of 2% - a challenge for any organisation,

but seemingly impossible in an operation that lacked the knowledge, skill and experience to drive sales.

Although staff were proud to work for VAA, they weren't so keen on being a 'sales person'. There was no sales culture, and people weren't encouraged to sell. Huge change was needed, and in record time if the next sales peak was to be properly exploited. But could they create a successful sales operation in just six weeks?

#### **The right people in the right roles**

VAA did have some good people, but not all would thrive in the new commercially focused culture. It was vital to have the right people with the right attitude in the right roles - people who wanted to sell and were motivated to develop. Assessment centres were used to select sales managers and team leaders, and once the right team was

in place, the training and coaching could begin.

Sales managers went through an intensive development programme, covering sales skills, sales coaching and sales performance management to give them the tools to inspire and motivate their team. Training for sales advisors was linked to Virgin's brand values to ensure customer service was never compromised.

Suddenly there was a new buzz within the team as for the first time selling was recognised and rewarded. Says Paul Dickinson, Director of Customer Services at VAA, *"There was even competition between teams. The service team loved getting their conversion rates up to levels the sales team would have been proud of."*

#### Instant impact

The impact was immediate and dramatic. Within three months the programme had paid for itself and productivity has continued to increase every month. Sales conversion rates rose steadily from 6% to 9% over two years, reflecting the sustainability of the programme and the success of its delivery.

Revenue increased by a staggering 48% over the same period substantially higher growth than in the travel industry as a whole.

Customer satisfaction increased by 92% - the shift in sales focus was done in such a way that customers perceived a higher level of service than before, and the company moved from 12th to 3rd place in the BPA Travel Sector customer service index.

#### Formal recognition

**“Effective training will help create a more effective, productive and flexible workforce. The message to UK Plc is simple: invest in training to gain a true competitive advantage.”**

The VAA/Blue Sky team's achievements were formally recognised when they won their regional final of the 2005 National Training Awards. The awards acknowledge outstanding and lasting excellence and success through training. Dr Graeme Hall, Chief Executive of UK Skills, who runs the National Training Awards on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills, says, *"Effective training will help create a more*

*effective, productive and flexible workforce. The message to UK Plc is simple: invest in training to gain a true competitive advantage."*

Meanwhile, Virgin staff are happier and more motivated, and attrition is down. One sales advisor said, *"I can't tell you how much more I enjoy my job and how proud I am to be part of something so great!"* VAA's Paul Dickinson adds, *"This is the sharpest team in the airline industry."*

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