

# salesmanagement

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## CAN YOUR MARKETING AND SELLING PROCESS BE IMPROVED?

Process improvement has revolutionized manufacturing over the past two decades, but is only now coming to sales and marketing. Yet it is coming, and it's something every marketing and sales executive should know about and consider employing.

Process improvement, also known as quality improvement, encompasses "scientific" approaches to management such as Six Sigma and Lean. In general, these methods measure and analyze the parts of a business process, eliminate unneeded parts, fix broken ones, add new ones, and monitor improvement.

It is the measurement, analysis, and systematic approaches that make these methods "scientific." For example, Six Sigma rests upon a five-step process called DMAIC (de-may'-ik): Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve and Control. Lean systematically eliminates activities that don't add value for customers and strengthens those that do.

This article introduces and illustrates basic process improvement concepts as they apply to marketing and sales.

### SEE SALES AS A PROCESS

A company's sales process comprises everything it does to find (market), win (sell) and keep (service) customers. Every activity in this end-to-end process can be identified and, if necessary, improved. This differs from the usual fixes for marketing and selling problems, such as branding, sales training, CRM systems, personnel changes or bigger bonuses. In fact, focusing on those fixes can blind managers to actual process problems.

A global bank thought the only way to increase revenue in a unit selling investment accounts to wealthy individuals was to add salespeople. But DMAIC revealed that the problem was not in selling new accounts, but in the procedures for opening them. The bank streamlined these procedures, at a fraction of the cost of expanding the salesforce, while boosting revenue and customer satisfaction. The idea wouldn't have surfaced without a process approach, which always pinpoints bottlenecks.

### CREATE VALUE FOR CUSTOMERS

The concept of creating value for customers roots process improvement in reality. What value do marketing and sales create for customers? Solutions to problems. Marketing locates and attracts people who have problems the company can solve. Sales helps apply products to those problems.

People in business continually ask themselves which problems need attention, who should be involved, and how to find and implement a solution. The company whose salespeople best answer those questions will win the most sales. Marketing and sales must locate people who are asking questions relevant to their product and learn what they value.

Yet marketing will often generate leads without first defining with sales what a lead really is. When marketing and sales do define leads, it is usually in terms of prospects' characteristics. A lead might be "a commercial bank with at least \$50 billion in assets" or "a service company under 300 employees."

But that doesn't set things in the context of what prospects value.

A software firm's website produced 200,000 "leads" annually. Unfortunately, Mickey Mouse was a frequent visitor. In fact, to avoid sales calls, 28 percent of visitors supplied bogus contact data. The company didn't know who visited specific pages, or why.

The website had been built around the company's products rather than visitors' needs. Thus, a lead was not "a specific person who needs a product like ours," but rather "unidentified people downloading something." A redesigned site dramatically increased lead quality by helping visitors get something they wanted (e.g., help with certain problems), requesting contact data in return.

When a lead is defined and generated in the context of customer value, you have an actual lead, which goes beyond the name of someone in some job at some company.

### HELP SALESPeOPLE SELL

The test of any marketing or selling improvement effort is: Does it sell, or help salespeople sell (now or in the future)? Sales process improvement should result in questions, value statements, new kinds of interactions, product characteristics, and internal improvements that help solve customers' problems, and thus help move more products and services.

A scientific company had a better, but more expensive, product that eliminated many hours of lab testing in food production. The salespeople could handle calls with lab and quality managers, but not plant managers, who had to approve the higher expense.

Business Value Mapping, a tool for detecting customer needs, revealed that in order to sell the value of that time (since no one would be laid off), salespeople had to know what else the researchers could be working on. In mapping business value, the company learned how to discover and express the impact of this freed-up lab time and soon saw major account wins.

### IT'S A PROCESS

Sales process improvement ranges from Six Sigma initiatives for global salesforces to limited projects improving lead-generation or selling techniques. Yet they always include defining, measuring, analyzing and improving specific activities on the basis of data and facts, usually from customers as well as from salespeople. Those are core methods of process improvement, and they work.

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