

Three Proven Tactics to Get Salespeople's Cooperation in Launching New Initiatives

By Michael J. Webb

One of the most common questions from executives trying to improve sales and marketing results is this:

“How can we get our salespeople's cooperation in our new (blank) initiative?”

Whether you are trying to implement process improvement, CRM, a product launch, or a lead generation campaign, getting salespeople's attention, support, and active cooperation is critical, yet is often painful and frustrating. Salespeople can often seem to be the most resistant, uncooperative group in the company.

Why is this and what can you do about it?

Why Are Salespeople Resistant to Management's Attempts to Improve?

Of course, not all salespeople are resistant to a company's attempts to “improve things.” Like any other group, some salespeople are early adopters and some are slow to change. New products, systems, and marketing campaigns that are “on the money” and fill a market void are usually embraced by sales organizations. Other types of changes can be viewed as risky and unfruitful by salespeople. Why? Here is what I have observed:

- **Salespeople face conflicts (of the type companies don't like to deal with).** Salespeople are at the point of conflict between what customers and suppliers want. If a competitor's offer seems cheaper, faster, or less risky to the customer, the salesperson's job chances for success go down, often for reasons they might never know. *Any “improvement” that might affect this balance is threatening to*

salespeople.

- **There can be conflicts in responsibility vs. control.**

People's resistance to change is normal. For sales organizations, there is this added dimension: Salespeople instinctively know when the problems are *outside* their control, such as the nature of the offers, the customers, or the competition. They will respond well to initiatives that *clarify and respect* the things they can and cannot control. *They will resist (one way or another), initiatives that continue to hold them responsible for what they cannot control.*

- **The default solution is (much too often) to “work harder.”**

Salespeople are highly paid, and they should be expected to elevate their personal performance and maximize their time, skills, and effectiveness. Right? Well, yes, up to a point. In many organizations I have seen, salespeople are asked to work harder, and they do for a while. *But when no one tries to change the basic conditions and conflicts they face in their environment, they get tired and frustrated.* Who wouldn't?

Salespeople may not be able to articulate the root causes of their problems (after all, that is not their job; it is management's job instead). So, they point out what seems obvious: “Our prices are too high.” “We need to match the competition.” Their management also points out what seems obvious: “We need more orders at higher margins.” “You've got to find a way.” Obviously, this approach has diminishing returns.

There is a limit to how hard people can work. This is especially true in mature companies. Because of their natural inward focus, they gradually lose their ability to hear or even respect the voice of the customer. The salespeople then by default usually are tasked with this job as well, by working harder, of course.

How Can We Gain Salespeople's Cooperation and Support?

The answer to this question is easy to say, not so easy to do:

“Make selling easier!”

It CAN be done, and IS increasingly being done in companies throughout North America. As I say in my book, *Sales and Marketing the Six Sigma Way*: “Marketing is anything that makes selling easier.”

Although there are many possibilities for improving things, here are three tactics that tend to engage salespeople’s whole-hearted support and cooperation:

1. Improve Lead Quality Once and For All

Lead generation remains the single biggest bottleneck in most sales organizations.

Unfortunately, since marketing is a separate department, most sales executives (not to mention presidents and CEOs) expect salespeople to somehow “find a way” to succeed, regardless of their marketing department’s inability to generate qualified leads. “Just Work Harder.”

In some markets there may be validity to this perspective. However, it is a serious blind spot because it ignores a fundamental problem: *If marketing departments don’t learn how to produce qualified leads, the salesperson will always be the bottleneck, the sales process will always be a hand-crafted cottage effort, and improvements in productivity will not happen.* Further, your company will be vulnerable to a competitor who figures it out first.

Salespeople cannot be in every place they need to be to find all the business there is. Of course, salespeople can always do things better and more efficiently and should be on the look out for sales opportunities where ever they are. Yet marketers have an incredible variety of communication channels at their disposal that can be in far more places at a fraction of the cost of the manual labor of salespeople ... if they know how to craft the right value propositions.

Although the many tactics for generating qualified leads are beyond the scope of this article, please be aware that enormous strides are being made every day in companies that—

- a) understand their customer's journey and
- b) know how to leverage direct-response marketing techniques.

These techniques deliver offers crafted to make it easier for customers to move through their problem-solving/buying process.

When marketers can supply the sales force with a predictable supply of qualified opportunities, the dynamics of the organization (and the market) change dramatically – and for the better.

2. Help Them Sell

The work of selling is vast and complex because what you have to do depends on the specific nature of the customer and their problem at a particular point in time. Still, many repetitive tasks can (and should) be automated. Salespeople generally welcome systems and processes that reduce the possibilities of errors and mistakes, and that make their jobs easier. Here are a few examples:

- **Nurturing Prospects Who Are Not Yet Ready to Buy**

Chances are your company has a position on the six or seven things customers should consider in shaping their thinking about a buying decision. Why not formulate those in a catchy, appealing series of e-mails or direct mailing pieces?

A salesperson could offer the educational, non-threatening series of messages as a way of staying in touch and helping the customer toward their objective until the time is right. The messages would be automatically sent each week or month until the prospect or salesperson “unsubscribes” them. They can include an offer to talk to the sales person (or other interaction) when they are ready, of course.

Would your salespeople be willing to try a tool like this? Most will, and most will find it helps their cause! (Further, the initiation of such an automated sequence is exactly what the CRM needs to identify the existence of an opportunity so it can be counted and tracked.)

- **Qualifying and Assessing Their Opportunities and Account Relationships**

Sales managers and salespeople are tremendously interested in qualification criteria, yet they are unaware of the powerful potential inherent in it. You can work them through an exercise that helps them remove most of the subjectivity from the equation by articulating concrete, observable characteristics about their sales opportunities. Then, they can implement a simple project where these observable characteristics are “measured” for a statistically significant number of their sales opportunities (via a simple electronic survey form).

Analyzing the data from this kind of project always reveals surprising insights that advance people’s thinking about their sales process. It reveals which of the characteristics are statistically significant to winning or losing their deals. It also reveals a “tipping-point,” a narrow range of scores above which the probability of closing is nearly 100%, and below which the probability of closing is almost zero.

The data can be used to refine and streamline the qualification criteria and the sales tools and provide much needed clarity for salespeople in prioritizing how they spend their time on their sales opportunities. I have seen this approach result in dramatic improvements in close ratios within a matter of a few months.

3. Save Them Time

When internal departments assume getting orders is the sales department’s problem, and executives have functional assumptions around marketing and selling, no one has a reason to look at how your company finds, wins, and keeps customers as a production

system. As a result, no one really “sees” the bottlenecks (except the customers and the sales force).

As a result, your sales force probably has time-wasting internal problems that keep them from productive time in the field. These problems may be administrative (expenses, activity reports, distribution issues, or ordering issues) or functional (generating proposals, quotations, demonstrations, or managing service problems).

Whatever they are, you can earn the respect and appreciation of your sales team if you can figure out the biggest time wasters and solve them. The main tools to get at waste are daily activity logging and time analysis; and customer value mapping with sales process mapping, best done in concert with one another. Then, determine whether the activity can be eliminated, simplified, or automated.

Biography of Michael J. Webb, President, Sales Performance Consultants, Inc.

Michael J. Webb is the founder of Sales Performance Consultants, a firm devoted to helping senior executives who need to make their sales funnel flow faster. Michael delivered the keynote address to the first two conferences ever held on applying Six Sigma to marketing and sales. He has helped companies such as MAQUET, Replicon, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Electro Technick Industries, and many others to find more of the right customers at higher margins and lower costs by improving their sales and marketing processes. Michael is the author of “*Sales and Marketing the Six Sigma Way*” (Kaplan, 2006) and numerous articles.