



Optimize Your Leads: Matching Your Sales Process to the Customer's Buying Process

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How Do You Use Your Sales Process?

Despite the talk about sales process, most sales and marketing professionals underutilize this important tool.

With the Internet changing the way customers buy, companies are re-aligning their sales process and marketing activities to the customer's buying process.

This article discusses three critical problems that can be addressed with enhanced use of the sales process:

1. To help sales gain a better understanding of where the prospect is in their buying process in order to improve sales engagement and conversations
2. To help marketing create and deliver more relevant and impactful content to prospects to accelerate their buying process
3. To optimize both marketing and sales outcomes

One of the important recommendations in this article is to identify ALL of the questions prospects must answer in order to buy your product, service or solution. A worksheet is provided to guide you through this process.

How do you use your sales process to direct and manage your selling activities?

For all the talk about sales process, I find most organizations use sales process in limited ways, typically as part of a weak, and notoriously inaccurate, forecasting activity.

Reps and managers can both benefit from an enhanced and regular use of sales process.

Consider three critical sales problems:

Timing Customer Engagements:

- How do you know where the prospect is in their buying process?
- How do you know if you are in too early, or too late?
- How can you quickly determine the appropriate engagement point for your conversation?

Creating and Delivering Content:

- How do you know what content is relevant and helpful to prospects?
- How do you know what content to build, or how to deliver it?

Optimizing Successful Outcomes:

- Who decides how the buying process will proceed, customer or seller?
- How do you know what are appropriate customer requests?
- How do you know which activities will accelerate or derail the process?

Timing Customer Engagements

While we have our sales process, it turns out most customers have their buying process. If you haven't analyzed, documented and verified your customer's buying process, this is a good place to start. Today, selling is all about facilitating a successful buying process for customers. It is the way to become a trusted advisor and to create differentiated value.

One of the most important exercises we've ever conducted is to assemble a cross functional team — sales, marketing, customer service -- and collectively answer the question: "What are All the questions our customers must answer in order to buy our product, service or solution?"

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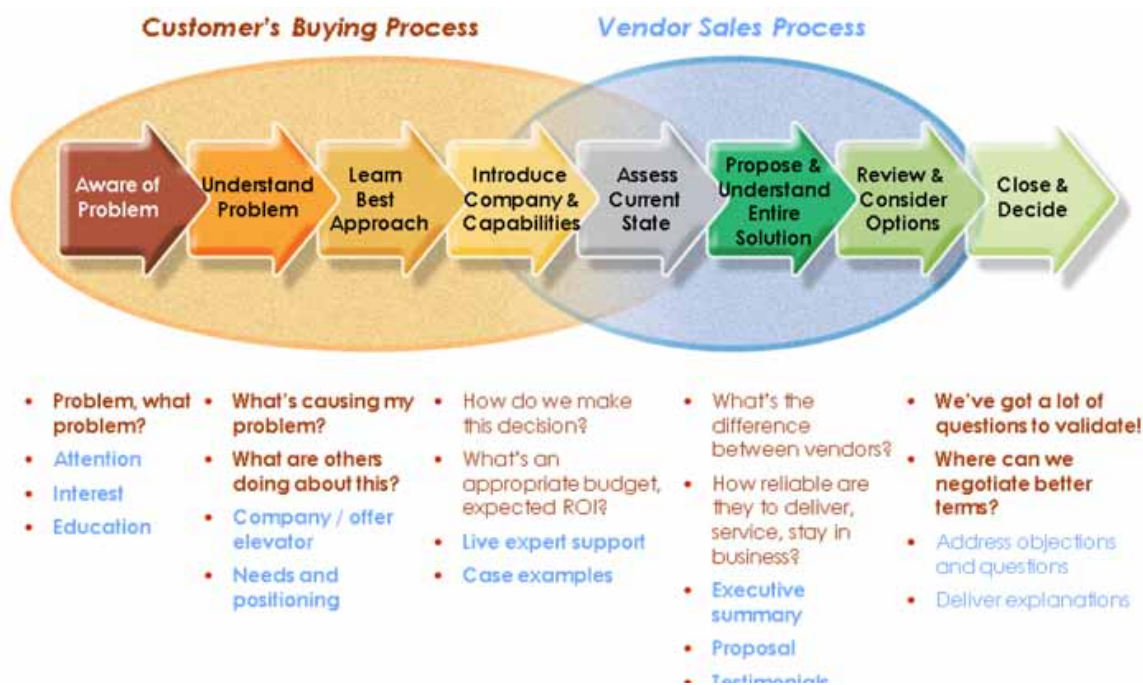
Start at the very beginning: "do I really have a problem, what is it, how would I recognize it?" Proceed all the way through the entire buying process. Be sure to document your answers. Writing ensures everyone is in agreement. It provides a discipline for staying focused and handling changes that occur in the market.

This exercise gets everyone in the mindset of the customer. It uncovers hidden issues that are often overlooked. Marketing becomes aware of the downstream questions that arise in the selling process, sales becomes aware of the early questions and customer service enlightens everyone.

Then, map each question to a stage of the buying process (as depicted below). Try to determine where in the process the customer will need to get the question answered. This provides multiple benefits:

For sales, the questions customers ask provide an indicator of where customers are in their process. This simplifies and accelerates the work of getting tuned into the prospect. It can help you identify if you are engaging too early, or too late, and factor that awareness into the account strategy and plan. For example, is your sales strategy primarily to "find" or "create" customers?

For marketing, this provides a way to define content requirements. Building content to answer customer questions provides a great way to organize or tag content so sales and marketing know when it should be used. This also provides "digital body language" feedback to marketing in the early prospect engagement stages that are conducted primarily online and through content.



A worksheet is included at the end of the article to assist you in identifying and mapping your customers' questions to your company's sales process.

Creating and Delivering Content

How does marketing know what content to build? How does sales know what content to send to different prospects, in different industries or at different stages of the sales process? How do both groups know which are the appropriate delivery methods to conveniently send information to prospects.

Get the team to use the sales process to identify the current communication methods that are used at each stage: telephone, email, mail, third party delivery, in person calls. Assess which methods are effective or in-effective, efficient or in-efficient. Identify the stages and questions that create bottlenecks or slowdowns in the sales process.

Perhaps information that is important to customers is missing. Maybe you service this requirement with an expensive and inefficient "four legged sales call" -- using secondary subject expert support. Perhaps premature travel is involved that could be shifted to web meetings.

Get the team to agree on the specific factors that make content relevant and convenient to customers: by role, issue or interest, buying stage, industry, solution alternative, information purpose (capture attention, educate, deliver proof points, etc.) as well as by format (email, web page, document, video, web meeting, mobile device, etc.)

With limited time, resources and budgets, marketing cannot create content for every situation. The sales process, buying questions at each stage of the process, and assessments noted provide filters to help prioritize and focus content development. This can help avoid the dreaded "random acts of content" that plague far too many organizations and exacerbate any rifts between marketing and sales.

Optimize Successful Outcomes

Of course it's all about optimizing successful outcomes. Have you ever been whipped around by requests from buyers who try to force you to show, tell, price or demo prematurely? If customers are buying a true commodity, perhaps they know the most effective buying process -- of course this won't be your most effective sales process.

What about a complex or solution oriented sale? How can you effectively engage and support prospects who are navigating a complex internal decision process and are unaccustomed to buying your particular complex solution? Have you ever chased deals that wouldn't be ready to close for months, quarters or years?

A big selling risk today is thinking that interested buyers are active prospects, when they may in fact be simply checking alternatives or using another vendor as negotiating fodder for the preferred vendor who started the engagement quarters earlier with online content provided by your competitor's marketing department.

Without a proven, practiced, defined and disciplined sales process, your outcomes will be at risk. By defining by stage the best practice activities, questions and proof points you will optimize your likelihood of a successful outcome -- or an early, reasoned abandonment of a deal you will never win.

Having conviction to a proven and clear sales process can simplify the complex sale, minimize selling risk and effort, and optimize the likelihood of your success.

Worksheet to Access Your Customer's Buying Process and Questions

To help you define your customer's buying process, and the questions they ask at each stage of that process, use this worksheet.

Customer Buying Stages and Questions Worksheet

What are ALL of the questions our customers must answer in order to buy our product, service or solution? Below are suggested customer buying stages and example customer questions to get you started. Edit the buying stages and questions for your business and customers.

Customer Buying Stage	Customer Buying Questions
Status Quo	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do we have a problem, how would we know (symptoms)? 2. How does it impact us (cost), why should we fix it? 3. How have others fixed it, how did it turn out? 4. Who owns the problem/solution, who should be involved? 5. Where do we go to learn more? 6. 7.
Priority Shift as a Result of Realizing the Pain and Impact, Committed to Change	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the real causes of the problem? 2. What is the scope of the problem? 3. What are industry best practices, consultants, case examples 4. How would we know it's time to make a change 5. 6. 7.
Research to Define Requirements, Justify Investments Sales Process Stage?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the key business criteria for making this decision? 2. How can we solve this problem with our current team/resources? 3. What models or best practices can we follow for decision and implementation? 4. What is the appropriate budget, timeframe, resources based upon expected ROI 5. 6. 7.
Evaluate Options Sales Process Stage?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What's the difference between approaches, vendors? 2. How reliable is the company: to deliver, service, viable? 3. 4. 5. 6. 7.

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<p>Step Back</p> <p>Sales Process Stage?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What has changed since we began our process? 2. What have we learned that might change our decision/criteria? 3. 4. 5. 6. 7.
<p>Validation of Selected Solution</p> <p>Sales Process Stage?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do we compare vendors and their proposals? 2. How do we validate what they propose – references? 3. What options don't we need? 4. Where can we negotiate better terms? 5. Does the implementation plan seem feasible? 6. 7.
<p>Finalize Decision and Contracts</p> <p>Sales Process Stage?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7.

About Avitage

Business-to-business (B2b) marketing and selling organizations execute their content marketing and sales enablement programs with Avitage services that help them create, manage and deliver highly relevant content in multiple media formats. This attracts new buyers (for lead generation), accelerates the customer buying process (for lead nurturing) and improves sales productivity and revenue growth. [Contact us now](#)

About Jigsaw

Jigsaw is the world's largest database of up-to-date, downloadable and complete contact and company information. We help companies increase effectiveness of their lead generation efforts, improving productivity and reducing sales cycle. [Contact us now](#)

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