Best Practices for
Sales Enablement

"Sales enablement" is the term for a host of activities and programs, all designed to help prepare and support salespeople. It's a team sport – salespeople working together, with support from marketing – rather than something marketing does for sales.

Successful sales enablement is much more than automated pricing guides and managerial oversight of the sales funnel. B2B companies are making huge investments in sales enablement tools, but too many begin with little understanding of the people, processes, and enterprise-wide insights they must bring together in order to make sales enablement a success.

Really successful sales enablement looks at the bigger picture and earns the right to make both a strategic and tactical contribution. Here are seven best practices to help you succeed.

1. Hire the right people

Theories about how to hire the right sales personnel are as old as the profession of selling itself. But modern sales enablement strategies and disciplines require professionals who are more flexible and teamwork-oriented than in decades past. Consider these steps to hire salespeople who are able and prepared to help their customers dream and achieve.

- Salespeople must have the business knowledge, skills, and capabilities to be truly consultative. It's easier than ever to research and understand the challenges of every micro-vertical market, and customers need to be approached by professionals who truly comprehend the buyer's daily needs and difficulties.

Sales enablement as Forrester Research defines it:
Sales enablement is a strategic, ongoing process that equips all client-facing employees with the ability to consistently and systematically have a valuable conversation with the right set of customer stakeholders at each stage of the customer's problem-solving life cycle to optimize the return of investment of the selling system.

- Sales professionals must be prepared to deal with the challenges of increasingly educated buyers who enter the sales funnel further along the decision-making process. Those who insist on running their standard sales playbook even when the customer makes clear that they have already identified their needs and best solutions will appear tone-deaf.

- Leadership remains a crucial quality in sales. Every business in the world faces heightened challenges to attract and retain clients. Sales professionals need to guide prospects to understand how new solutions will engage and delight their own prospects and customers.

2. Observe, evaluate, and understand your reps

Successfully introducing new sales enablement technology and process means looking beyond individual bottom-line production and taking on the attitude and role of a sales performance consultant. Approaching the sales enablement process with an open mind and inclusive attitude will help avoid common pitfalls, such as focusing too much on process automation, or forcing the entire sales staff to follow overly rigid scripts.

- Devise your own internal measurement of a sales rep's Return on Effort. Every sales activity and customer contact potentially correlates to buyer action. Understanding these connections helps you model sales enablement tools and techniques which help salespeople increase their impact.

- Sales production is the result of a wide variety of internal and external factors. Skills and knowledge, motivation, and environment all play crucial roles in sales performance.

- Many sales enablement approaches go wrong because they focus on measuring salesperson effort, rather than buyer impact. Feedback which helps reps understand the impact their actions have on the status of a customer, and guidance on how best to invest their efforts to maximize that impact, will enjoy the greatest adoption.

- Don't assume you know what training a sales team needs — and don't believe that all sales reps need, or will benefit from, the same training.

  - Sales reps with strong sales skills may be less inclined to get to know a product in intimate detail because they work by getting to know the essential details and then applying their stronger selling ability.

  - Sales reps with stronger inclinations toward the technical side of a product will be inclined to spend more time getting to know those little details which, hopefully, will offset their, perhaps, weaker sales skills.

Technical training is best delivered by product managers or product marketing managers. The marketing influence will help a salesperson understand key messages, differentiators and unique selling points, while technical product managers will be able to articulate unique features and functions, as well as competitive weaknesses.

"Research shows that 70 to 80 percent of the time, under-performance is due to environmental rather than individual factors, yet most of the time sales enablement solutions focus on improving the individual."

–Robert Koehler
LinkedIn

3. Provide continual product, competition, and buyer training

If you have a physical location, maximize your calls to action at the point of sale or interaction with customers. Even if people are just window shopping, you can reach them with calls to action to engage with you via an email program that offers benefits and value. That could be discounts, sales alerts, new product releases, contests, etc.

- Understanding how the client perceives your organization is a powerful training tool. Look through the eyes of both your happy and dissatisfied customers. Sales reps should know not only how a customer justifies a purchase, but also how they rationalize their decision to end the buying relationship.

- Sellers tend to think in terms of features and benefits, but buyers think in terms of capabilities—the unique set of problems they can solve by purchasing your product, and the reason your product blazes the fastest, cheapest or most effective trail to success. The sooner your reps understand how to listen for and how to identify customer problems, the sooner they can make sales based on capabilities.

- As part of the measurement and evaluation of your reps, build an understanding of how each individual rep learns best. Some reps rely on strong sales acumen rather than deep product knowledge to win business, and these may benefit from streamlined access to marketing automation tools and a steady stream of new prospects. Others pride themselves on unparalleled domain expertise, and should be paired with product managers and product marketing managers who can articulate key advantages and competitive weaknesses.

- Create talk tracks that will help reps have the right conversations, with the right vocabulary for each buyer. Just as reps must understand the problems faced by buyers and the capabilities they seek, they must also learn the keywords and terminology their buyers use. For example, the controller of a small logging company speaks a different language than the office manager of a large corporate law firm. Sales enablement should identify buyer personae, along both vertical and organizational lines, and help reps understand how to communicate clearly with those buyers.

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>
> –Candyce Edelen
> CEO, PropelGrowth

4. Use your own crowd to crowdsource sales enablement tools

Nothing can doom a sales enablement strategy faster than the perception that it's something marketing is imposing on sales. Instead, the development and refinement of sales enablement should be a collaborative and open process.

- Observe what your top sales performers do and what materials they use at each stage in the buying decision process. Uncover the stories and anecdotes they use to help make their point. Encourage them to share the tools and tips that have worked best for them. Refine the ideas as necessary and share them with the rest of the sales organization

- Competitive insights are everywhere – marketing data, product research, RFP lists, and anecdotal war stories, to name just a few. The best way to position against a competitor is to know exactly what they offer and how they offer it. Clear, honest communication about competitor advantages and weaknesses will help reps better position your offerings against the equally polished messages from your rivals.

- Encourage reps to speak plainly about what is working and what isn't, and act on the evidence they present about which tools and processes work, and which are hindering their production.

5. Align content and tools to the buying cycle

The longer buying cycle and the highly informed buyer are facts of life which won't go away. Use marketing tools to help your reps more effective communicators is vital to winning business under these conditions.

- Sales must become more astute at communicating with buyers using the communications means that best enables buyers along their buyer journey. Maybe that's email; maybe it's social media. Whatever it may be (and it's likely more than one channel), enable sales with content that they don't t need to rework to fit the communication channel.

- Make the most of tools that qualify what a buyer is thinking about. For example, suppose the buyer clicked through an email that promoted a product, but spent a lot of time on your website looking at a different product. And then that buyer downloaded a white paper about how to solve a specific problem with the second product. This tells your sales rep what's on that buyer's mind, and they know what to talk about when they make that call or send that one-to-one email. The right tool shows this clearly.

- Make the most of tools that quantify the buyer's behavior. Sales and marketing should work together to identify known behaviors of your best customers. Once you know what actions correspond to which steps along the

buyer's journey, develop a scoring system that allots points for actions proven to be buying signals.

- Use tools to pass qualified leads at exactly the right time for sales to capitalize on current interest. In the case of lead scoring, that's when the prospect's total score passes a threshold, and that prospect automatically is sent to sales as a qualified lead. The salesperson can see the steps and so knows just why this lead is qualified; they also know what step should come next, and know which content will help the lead take that next step.

- Marketing should build templates for sales to use for email outreach, in both HTML and plain text. If the teams use a marketing automation system that's tightly integrated into a CRM, it's especially easy for the sales rep. Certain systems allow the reps to access marketing email right from within the CRM system, even sending small batches that are dynamically customized on the fly, based on segment.

- Every piece of product data, marketing collateral, pricing, and training should be assigned to a subject matter expert in the organization. If one can't be found, that's a clear signal that it's time for a refresh.

6. Be vigilant over time to ward off fragmentation and drift

As organizations grow, expand, seek new audiences, merge, and spin off, disconnections and inconsistencies crop up. Products have different names in different regions. Pricing tables seem arbitrary because the CFOs who tried to reconcile them left after the merger was complete. Territories are drawn along gerrymandered lines. The sales enablement process can help you discover and weed out many of these anomalies and vestigial artifacts.

- In many companies, new-hire sales training bears little resemblance to ongoing sales enablement tools, often because they were created at very different times by very different teams. Ensure that your reps hear a consistent message throughout their entire tenure with your firm.

- Nobody likes hearing different answers to the same question, depending on who they ask. Putting your own house in order provides customers with a more consistent and seamless experience—the much sought-after "single face to the customer."

7. Integrate sales enablement across the business

Effective sales enablement not only brings the sales department's reps, managers and leadership to the same table, but includes voices and input from the entire organization.

- Many sales enablement programs fail because they are too tightly controlled by a small branch of the sales department, or focus exclusively on a single

tactic such as e-learning or content automation. Sales enablement should work hand-in-hand with strategies and tools including marketing automation, content development, product development, and customer service.

- The ideal sales enablement team has an organizational structure that enables easy integration. All team members should be empowered to communicate clearly and openly with one another, and encouraged to do so on a regular basis.

In the end, sales enablement is first and foremost about attitude. It's a team approach to sales that gives everyone in the organization a support role in aligning resources to make the right sale to the right customer. Marketing plays a key role, ensuring that the right information, tools, and subject matter experts can be delivered in a way that is relevant to each unique selling situation.

About Act-On Software

Act-On Software's cloud-based marketing automation platform is the foundation of successful marketing campaigns everywhere – from small, simple and direct, to complex globally implemented programs.

Act-On's technology features an Instant-On™ database for accelerated campaign implementation; an easy, highly intuitive user interface; and a comprehensive, feature-rich solution set. This includes a best-in-class email engine with one-click integration to leading web conferencing and CRM solutions; tools for website visitor tracking, lead scoring, lead nurturing and social media prospecting; design tools for web forms, landing pages and emails; and more.

Act-On is headquartered in Beaverton, Oregon, with offices in Roseville and San Mateo, California, and Bangalore, India.

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