Getting Sales to Accept More Qualified Leads
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Would you like to reduce the number of qualified leads passed on by marketing that sales rejects? It's a relatively easy disconnect to resolve. All it takes is marketing and sales collaborating around the definition of the various stages in the opportunity pipeline and a scoring methodology.

If you want to get serious about opportunity management, just follow these three steps:

1. Define Each Stage in the Buying Pipeline.

When marketing, sales, and management all speak the same language regarding opportunities in the pipeline, everyone can work together to nurture those opportunities most promising from a sales and revenue perspective. Therefore, it's important to create a glossary of standard terms for what your company considers a contact, suspect, lead, qualified lead, prospect, and so forth.

The best way to do this is to outline the customer buying process based on observable behaviors, then mapping these to the appropriate opportunity stage. In this first step you will do your best to identify the behaviors of your customer buying process you can observe. But of course, you will want to validate this truly is their process.

To illustrate this idea, let's suppose based on experience, research and customer input, your customers' buying process includes the following behaviors:

- Registering for a Webinar.
- Subscribing to the company newsletter.
- Downloading a white paper.
- Downloading product literature.
- Participating in a live demo.
- Requesting or scheduling a meeting with their decision-maker.

- Requesting pricing information.
- Offering buying criteria.
- Providing budget and timing information.
- Requesting or participating in a product trial.
- Contacting references.
- Requesting an RFP.
- Conducting an internal review of all RFPs.
- Holding meetings with the top 1 to 2 suppliers selected from the RFP process.

Again, based on experience and research, determine which behaviors go into which stage of the pipeline. Using this example, we might map the behaviors below as follows:

- Registering for a Webinar and subscribing to the company newsletter represent the contact stage.
- Participating in a live demo and requesting a product sample represent the suspect stage.
- Requesting pricing information and scheduling an appointment with the decision-maker represent the lead stage.
- Providing buying criteria, requesting to participate in a product trial, and requesting an RFP go into the qualified lead stage.
- Contacting references and holding meetings with the RFP finalists might represent the prospect stage.

While these most likely exemplify just a few behaviors in the buying process, hopefully you grasp the main idea: By using observable behaviors and mapping them to the pipeline, there is much less ambiguity. Once you complete and validate the behaviors and stages, create and publish an opportunity pipeline glossary that documents how your company defines each stage. This will help avoid confusion later.

2. **Establish Ideal Behavioral and Fit Criteria.**

   Now that you've completed the first step, you can use the process to establish the criteria for the ideal opportunity. We recommend working from two key categories: the buying behaviors and fit. The latter helps determine whether the opportunity would be an ideal profitable customer for your organization.

   Using all the behaviors you identified, select those that would suggest the opportunity is ready to buy. Then make a list of criteria for your fit category. For example, the opportunity is in a target vertical where you have domain expertise. Or your product is a "plug and play" way for them to solve their problem.

   Now establish your threshold criteria. Select those criterion that serve as the gate for passing an opportunity to sales.

3. **Develop an Opportunity Scoring Methodology.**

   A key part of your qualification should be the opportunity score. The concept of opportunity or lead scoring is relatively simple. Essentially, you assign points based on how well an opportunity meets each of your qualification criteria.

   To create your scoring method, assign points to all the buying behaviors, as well as the fit criteria. Then create some ranges to help with the granularity. This way you can assess an opportunity both in terms of the conversion potential and fit. To illustrate this idea let's say we score some of the behaviors and fit as follows:

   Fit

   - In a target vertical where you have domain expertise: five points.
   - In a target vertical where you don't have domain expertise: three points.
   - Not in a target vertical: no points.
   - Your product is ideally suited to solve their problem: five points.
   - Your product will solve their problem with some customization: three points.
   - Your product will not solve their problem without a major investment on your part: no points.

<u>Behaviors</u>

- Meeting held with decision-maker: five points.
- Meeting held with recommender: three points.
- Meeting held with influencer: one point.
- Provided product specification and buying criteria: five points.
- Indicated they are funded: five points.
- Indicated budget is approved: three points.
- Contacted references: five points.
- Requested references: one point.
- Participated in on-site demo: five points.
- Participated in online demo: one point.

You will need to complete this point assignment process for all of the behaviors and fit criteria. As part of your scoring method you will also want to consider the volume of actions exhibited by the opportunity within a period of time as part of your criteria.

Establish your point criteria and volume thresholds—that is, what is the minimum number of points, minimum criteria, and minimum number of action an opportunity needs to meet in order to pass the opportunity to sales? You now have three components that comprise what constitutes a sales-worthy qualified lead: point, volume and criteria thresholds.

Sales agrees to accept opportunities that meet these thresholds and marketing agrees to only forward those opportunities. So for example, qualified leads must be at least 20 points and must include (at a minimum) the behaviors indicating they are funded, participated in an on-site demo, and are in a target vertical.

Now, score each opportunity. As a team, discuss what to do with those opportunities at various stages in the pipeline that don't meet the thresholds, so they are appropriately nurtured.

Keep in mind, lead scores should evolve as you see changes in customer buying behavior. This will help optimize the accuracy of the lead score and your marketing efforts.