



Six Best-Practices to Improve Sales and Marketing Alignment

by Laura Patterson, CEO of VisionEdge Marketing

Your sales and marketing organizations are the most critical links to customers. Having well-oiled sales and marketing machines that work well together can make all the difference in successfully addressing revenue and growth.

The alignment of those two organizations determines how well a company attracts buyers and sells to them. The relationship is more than just a simple handoff at the point a lead is generated; it is the foundation for profitable revenue growth.

Research firm IDC calls marketing and sales alignment one of the greatest opportunities to improve the revenue cycle.

Aligning Sales and Marketing in Four Key Areas

There's plenty of talk about aligning Sales and Marketing, and most often that conversation is around lead management. But Sales and Marketing need to be aligned in at least these four areas:

1. Market and customer segmentation
2. Go-to-market strategy, process, and planning
3. Sales enablement
4. Opportunity management

That fourth area, opportunity management, is one of the first places any organization can address to see relatively fast improvements and value.

What is opportunity management? It's the complete process of tracking and managing new revenue opportunities (prospective and current customer business)—from the generation of the opportunity to its conversion into a customer relationship.

When well defined and properly implemented, the opportunity-management process provides insight into both the effectiveness and the efficiency of your marketing and sales efforts.

Six Opportunity-Management Best-Practices

Today's business environment has brought the topic of opportunity management to the forefront. Organizations cannot afford opportunities to languish on the vine or to expend energy, time, and money pursuing opportunities that will not convert to business.

The following six best-practices can help you increase the effectiveness of your opportunity-management process:

1. Use the customer-buying process as the foundation for aligning both organizations.
2. Track and score leads based on prospect behavior.
3. Collaborate on defining a qualified lead to determine when an opportunity is sales-ready.
4. Measure Marketing's impact on the sales pipeline and the number of open opportunities that result from marketing programs.
5. Use customer behavior to map the most-appropriate subsequent interactions.

6. Leverage opportunity-nurturing programs.

The first best-practice, using the customer-buying process as the foundation for aligning both organizations, is the very first step any organization can take to improve its marketing and sales alignment.

Doing so has implications for the remaining best-practices as well as for the configuration of your marketing-automation, sales-automation, and campaign-management systems.

A Customer-Oriented Opportunity-Management Pipeline

The notion of a sales pipeline (that is, the flow of business opportunities), is very familiar to most organizations. But developing that pipeline around the customer-buying process may be new territory.

The following two lists hint at the differences between a sales-oriented pipeline and a customer buying-oriented pipeline.

Scenario A: Pipeline Elements

- Identify the buyer.
- Send an email.
- Call to meet.
- Assess the need.
- Determine the budget.

- Submit a quote.
- Deliver a presentation.
- Submit a proposal.

Scenario B: Pipeline Elements

- Visit website.
- Download a document.
- Request a call.
- Describe a project.
- Attend a webinar.
- Schedule a meeting.
- Provide specification and budget.
- Participate in a demo.
- Request a proposal.

Did you catch the nuances between the two scenarios? If you thought Scenario B described customer behavior and Scenario A described company behavior, you are right on target.

Here are seven steps you can use to create a customer buying pipeline:

1. Define the customer buying process and each incremental behavioral commitment for each buying segment.
2. Group the behaviors into buying stages that map to the buying process.
3. Validate the pipeline with customers, and modify as needed.
4. Determine stage owners.
5. Map marketing and sales tools and processes to each stage.
6. Configure marketing-automation, sales-automation, and campaign-management systems.
7. Monitor, measure, and report results and payback, and modify as needed.

Ideally, Marketing and Sales should work together to engineer a customer buying pipeline. There is also merit—when using someone from the outside—in facilitating the process to ensure it is collaborative, to manage the customer validation, and to support the system-configuration changes.

Using a customer-centric model is a valuable method for improving marketing and sales alignment, effectiveness, and measurement. It enables an organization to shift from a transactional focus to one that is more customer-focused and designed to accelerate and reduce the cost of revenue generation.\

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