

Plugging-In Six Strategies for Sales Success

By: Mike Koper



So When Can We Start?

Lately I've been deluged with the question of "How's business out there?" from customers past and present to new acquaintances. The sales landscape is composed of many challenges for any large multinational corporation - they're seeking to gain an increasing percentage of market share, solidify customer relations and improve process throughput. The sales landscape is also daunting and cluttered for ambitious companies of all sizes itching to grow at warp-speed. A decisive balancing act in the communication equation is found in leveraging social media to meet and conquer the challenge of stern competition. Another compounding foundational issue for businesses seeking solutions is whom to trust. The information tsunami wields a large hammer that it flings around to hit most every business with a resounding thud. The thud has been heard from Main Street to the Internet.

Selling technical products and services desired by customers has completely changed, along with the use of sophisticated technologies. New technical media outlets offer superior integration between uncovering customer needs and building strong customer relations. Sales integration is a two-way street; sales and marketing must be seamless with distribution and delivery. One hiccup in the eyes of the customer can tarnish a long-standing relationship cultivated through interactive dialogue.

All things aside, the latest economic whipsaw can be summed up as "Life is now different" and in order to remain or attain a top position in technical product sales, more emphasis must be placed on technical interaction with the customer. Such interaction begins with educating, guiding and servicing the issues that are on the front burner of the customer. This was made evident when a customer wanted me to walk them through some software ailments he was having with his spot weld testing & measurement process. The few minutes of conversation led to an engagement to perform training to his staff. Another discovery I experienced in the "Life is Different" economy, is if a potential customer is left to their own devices they will go shop; this is where sales relationships either foster a trust to collaborate or it becomes the birth of dissention instead. Being technically competent precisely at the moment of sharing ideas and solutions yields the building bridge of being concerned with the customer's tribulations. If you can quickly offer insight to a solution, your efforts are a beacon of light to an overloaded manager or supervisor short on time. More and more sales in today's marketplace, including everything from hydraulic fittings to advanced automation controls have either boomed or busted under new methodologies of marketing and sales. The measurable gap is supplying a solution to turn an otherwise thorny situation into a measurable business element.

A Creed to Follow

In doing my evaluation of how today's 21st century companies are assessing and buying professional services, I happened across a group of prominent software developers who wrote the [Agile Manifesto](#)¹ based on some key values, including:

- Individuals and interactions (communication) over processes and tools
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
- Responding to change over following a plan

The group was trying to achieve super-sized agility, a nimbleness that would let organizations execute faster and better, not through a lack of processes, just more collaboration. I found interaction with the customer through various management levels led to transforming the communication into urgency. The Agile Principles have been modified to reflect providing a solution to a customer's need:

- Individuals and interactions (communication) over processes and tools
- Welcome changing requirements. Agile processes harness change for your advantage. We all know that things change anyways

- Iterate or evaporate: the planning and feedback cycle needs to be reduced to daily and weekly, not quarterly and monthly
- Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done
- The best marketing emerges from self-organizing teams
- At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly¹

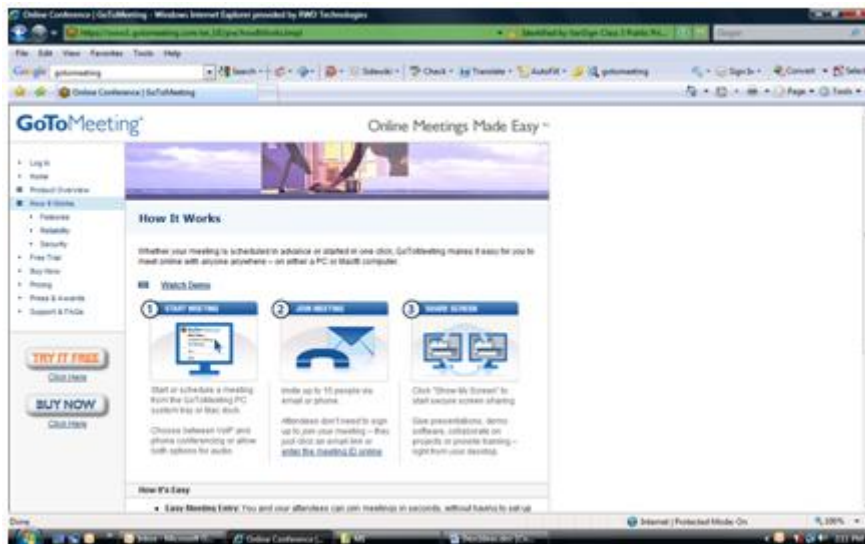


FIGURE 1: WEBEX AND CONFERENCE CALLS ARE POWERFUL TOOLS FOR CLIENT COMMUNICATIONS

More to the point is that marketing needs a methodology, and the spirit and intent behind Agile Principles makes it very practical in application. For example, RWD provided a customer with Arc Flash training; the course was covered in a one-day overview workshop. After more than a year had passed, the customer sent an email stating, "I had taken your Arc Flash Awareness training back in September. I wanted to ask you if you do any online or web-based training?" Senior Corporate Electrical Project Engineer. He wanted more in-depth knowledge of safety compliance initiative while making an effort to conserve a severely tightened training budget. To meet the compliance mandate, he asked for an online download or Webinar. Similar requests have recently increased, for example, on another occasion I directed a prospect to go to the RWD home page and attend one of the Webinars currently offered. Converting a prospect to customer involves educating them in the knowledge you have with the help of either presentation aids or via the Monarch of Selling: the Website. The incentive of dialogue is to convert the prospect from the chatter level of inquirer to focusing on your company's website as the portal of research, to do the data gathering, and you are their Guide. My experience is that most websites are not so clear and this is where the technical sales representative needs to go along with the prospect to help maneuver concisely to the technical details that meet the needs of the customer. Like the fairy tale of yesteryear, there are always many things to see on the way to grandmother's house and when guiding your customer to their set of information, other potential solutions may present themselves or become a topic of discussion after the initial information quest is attained. That information may include product specifications, a technical newsletter or topic-related whitepaper. Say your customer is looking for an avenue on how to maximize their manufacturing floor's throughput, get them to the solution fast. The exercise of expediting the request in and of itself will lead to further inquiries about additional information.

Flexibility & Patience

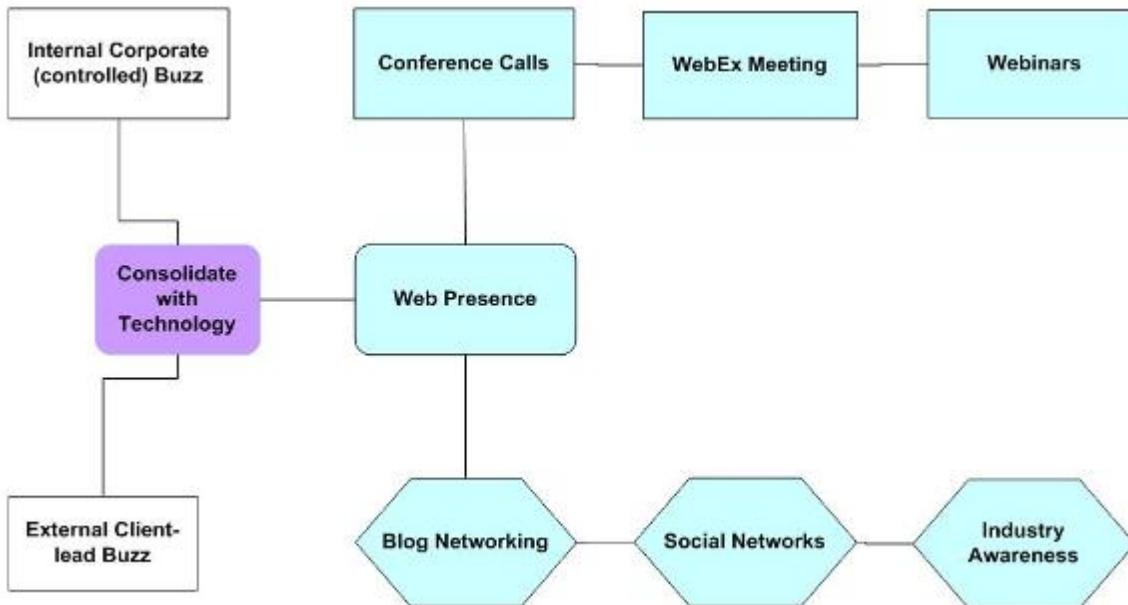


FIGURE 2: SOCIAL NETWORKING PROCESS FLOW

The single act of providing subtle assistance in the conversion stage is the bond building basis of collaboration. Collaboration is the key in technical sales. Fine lines are drawn in the sand between buyer and seller when technology is being discussed. Sales engineers need to be flexible, helpful and patient. However, an invisible wall is instituted at the onset in order to avoid the pitfall of becoming an unpaid consultant whereby your product and service can be monetized by the customer. While customers and sales engineers begin discussions to solve problems, potentially opposing intentions can springboard to the forefront of any collaborative endeavor. Educating the customers and uncovering opportunities for customized solutions may lead to more decisive customer action. On one such occasion, the spinning wheels of collaboration happened when an existing client had developed new auditing requirements for their fabricating suppliers. The current client allowed me access to their process standards, the customer's suppliers needed to follow the process standards to be compliant. I became knowledgeable in the standards and the technology being associated with the standards. This bit of client collaboration led to further sales with those suppliers whose intent was to pass the technical part performance audits mandated by their customer.

6 Strategies to Technical-Based Sales Success

It is important to understand the basic rules of technical sales and today's sales landscape.

1. Never implement a sales tactic without a strategy. It can be so tempting at times to just jump on the bandwagon of the next "big thing" without really understanding why. A small amount of skepticism and research can go a long way to keep sales efforts on track. Today's sales engineer needs tools, technically advanced and near flawless, find the sales tool that fits.
2. Attention IS scarce, but your prospects are still looking for the right information. Your prospects are being pulled in a million different directions online and offline. Everything you have been hearing about information overload is also true. Yet your prospects continue to search online for answers. The difference is that they want the information their way.
3. When becoming the expert, content is KING. Your sales success begins online and is directly proportional to the quality of information you provide. Then you may be able to take it to the customer's doorstep. You must be at the top of your game; consistent clients come to those who consistently provide a high quality service. Rest is for the weary, your information must be kept fresh and highlight even the most elementary aspects of your product.

4. Advertising is out. Expertise is in. According to a McKinley survey, only 14% of people trust advertising. Personally, I think that number is too high. While various styles of online and offline advertising may work for some products, it rarely works for service-oriented professions and technical products. Businesses that are looking to buy are first skittish about what they see in advertisements, they research extensively. Working to meet the client's expectations and be established as an expert is the KEY to attracting more clients.
5. Community. Community. Community. The rules of selling have changed for business to business - especially those offering technical solutions in a complex world. Community involvement does matter in achieving the customer to provider alignment. Uncovered various needs of the client becomes a by-product to meeting the end-user needs and allowing the end-user to propagate online to a community of people who LOVE what you have to offer. Appeal to the select few; appeal to your ideal clients.
6. Leverage Technology. Social Media is essential to the creation of "Buzz." It's evangelizing what you can do—achievements matter in the world of social media and dissemination of the news is gratifying to the company. Buzz can also boost the awareness of being the "solver," "solution provider" or someone "sought." Reliance on technology has been an internal component to minimize costs while maximizing the potential of online content and communications through interaction and webinars, which enhance the customers' experience while assembling the pieces necessary to develop relations.

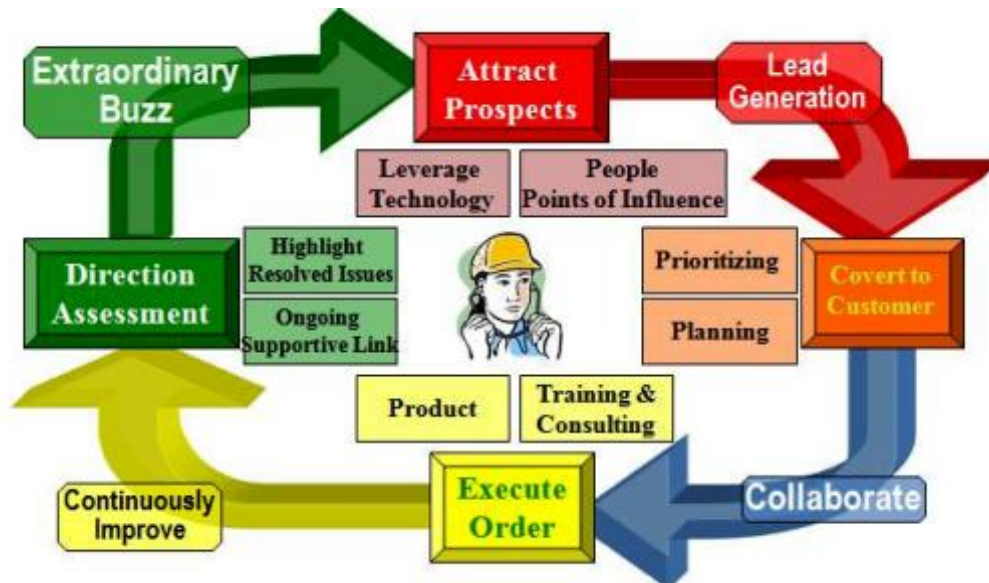


FIGURE 3: TECHNICAL STRATEGIES FOR SALES PROCUREMENT MAPPING

Attracting prospects is Job number #1, whether it's from new leads generated at trade shows, blogs or online symposiums. Converting prospects to customers is a fundamental principle reason as to why the business can exist and a crucial part of any business model. O.Q.C., Only Quality Customers becomes a pillar in the sales model, shown in Figure 4.

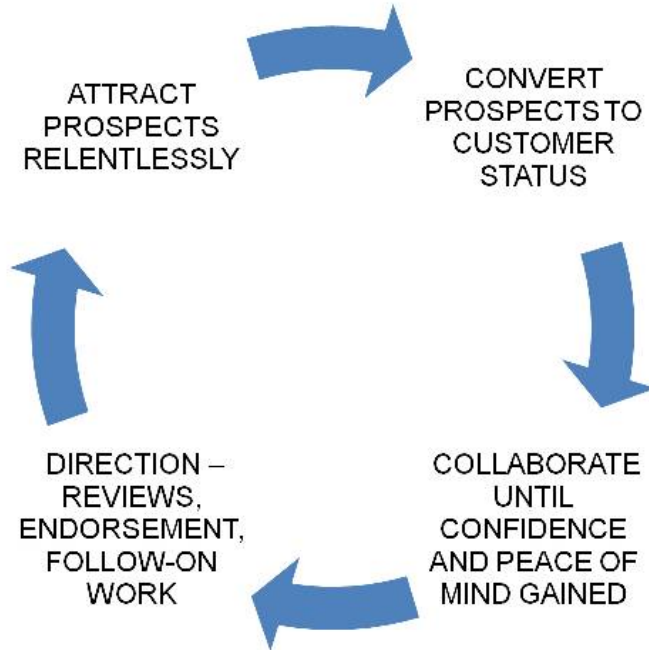


FIGURE 4: SALES PROCUREMENT CYCLE IN CUSTOMER-BASED SELLING

Quality is the target to strive for emphatically. Each customer is asking “what can your company do for me?”... Can what you’re suggesting make an impact on bridging the gap of knowledge that exists in the performance that is already occurring versus performance thereafter? The metric begins to boil down to a “before” and “after” picture of a remodeling job more apt to be seen on a cable station home improvement show. Because of these constraints, in as few of words as possible your product or service must say ... “Our team can do abc123 in xyz ...” Then you’ve got the benefit summed up—nicely packaged, free flowing, short sweet simple and clear. And with that image comes the Differentiator, it’s what you can provide in comparison to what your competition can. In reality, you must be Different ... with a capital D someway. Otherwise you’re a commodity and commodities rarely have pricing power and tend to have subpar profit margins. So what makes you different than your competitors? Become a leader in providing unique value-added characteristics in the products and services provided to customers, each such feature must be elevated to become paramount to the customer’s success. Moreover, dealing with experts in a chosen field is a huge differentiator... dealing with a “proven” expert in that field can make all the difference in the world. Customers are in search of predictability and solid outcomes, which equates to a peace of mind gained through collaboration, continuous improvement and customized solutions. It doesn’t matter if you’re selling toilet seats or carbon nanoparticles, all customers want to feel three levels of confidence in the relationship; 1) being taken care of , 2) that their business is important to you, and 3) their outcome or result is what’s to be expected. Curveballs, hiccups, and One-ups have no place in the professional world of technical sales. Pushing sales tends to lead to shoved sales while attracted sales are more inclined to lead to long term customers more apt to choose your company and you, again and again.

About the author:

Mike Koper is the Senior Projects Specialist for RWD’s Manufacturing group and has been a leader in the company for 13 years. As a certified Project Manager, he works to interface with client’s plants while establishing new and maintaining current training programs. He brings over 20 years to the manufacturing industry and has authored over 15 articles in trade magazines.

¹Agilemanifesto.org. Retrieved on November 30, 2009 from agilemanifesto.org website. <http://agilemanifesto.org/>

²Webex is a trademark product of Cisco.