



Do You Understand How Your Customers Buy?

People want to buy but not be sold to. Customers are people, and all people tend to go through a similar decision-making process, which means that sales need to be in lockstep with where their customers are in their decision process and keep it top of mind that it's about the customer's needs and timing, not theirs.

Below are some questions you might want to pose to your own sales organization:

- How well do you understand how your customers buy?
- Who/what is driving your sales process?
- Is your selling process aligned with your customer's buying process?

Using selling actions to measure where your salespeople are in the selling/buying process can feel akin to pouring cups of water into a bucket with a hole in the bottom. They may feel as though they are making progress, but things are not moving forward at all. All too often sales professionals go through their sales process thinking they are advancing the sale. In many cases they reach the point of having proposed a solution to a customer who has not even yet recognized the need for change. They think the sales process has stalled but in fact it has just outpaced the customer's thought process.

This creates the familiar scenario wherein a sales professional submits a proposal and then wonders why the customer does not get back to them. The answer is simple. The customer may not have really been interested in a proposal in the first place. Even if they requested one, it might have been simply to secure a point of reference. However, the salesperson assumed the request represented a genuine interest in taking action.



Determining where an opportunity is in the sales process based only on the selling actions your salespeople have taken is meaningless if they haven't validated those with corresponding customer actions. Key customer actions should be established as "gates" that determine exactly when an opportunity moves from one sales funnel stage to the next. For example, members of your sales team should not be moving from pursuing to closing when they submit a proposal. They move from pursuing to closing when the customer validates their solution and expresses interest in moving to the next step toward putting it in place.

Buyers today are smarter, more educated, and demanding—of the ability to buy on their own terms—so the need to direct your sales teams to engage in buyer-centric selling has never been greater. Doing so will also differentiate your organization and keep it out of the commodities bucket.

The sales funnel is the ultimate dashboard of a sales organization's overall health. It serves to help leadership better forecast revenue targets and growth as well as understand when it may need to make operational investments. In the sales performance world, we work across industries to help drive profitable revenue. One of the first questions we ask is about the overall health of their sales funnel. As we dig into different aspects of funnel health/characteristics, we seek to understand how they determine how opportunities move from one stage to the next. Quite often, the "gates" shared are internal selling actions, such as meeting with a decision maker or providing a proposal. While understanding and executing on the right selling actions are critical, the key to a successful sales strategy is aligning those to the customer's buying actions.

By mapping your funnel to customer actions helps:

- Sales leaders achieve more accurate forecasting and truer funnel metrics around velocity



- Frontline managers obtain more accurate reporting and targeted coaching opportunities
- Salespeople target selling actions to move deals, hit quotas, and better understand their personal funnel

Trying to “jam” through a deal won’t benefit the sales professional or the customer. Reflect on those times you’ve been in a store where a salesperson is pushing you to buy something that you’re not ready to buy (or perhaps you just need to understand your options better?). The tendency for most of us is to run in the opposite direction, never to return. Not only does the deal not get closed that day, the salesperson has eliminated him- or herself from closing it—ever.

The sales process and the client’s buying process must stay in alignment. If your salesperson loses the deal today, it also falls out of the future funnel. Managing the selling/buying process using customer actions is one of the easiest things a sales team can do to impact a key performance metric—length of sales cycle. You don’t want them to short-cut the sales process to expedite things. Sales professionals can shorten the sales cycle the *right* way by bringing customer- action commitments into part of the sales process through more proactive opportunity management and better decision making around when to opt out.