



Aligning sales and marketing

Insight Guide



Two interrelated business functions

Sales depends on marketing for its fuel, while marketing exists to feed sales.

Sales and marketing are two clearly interrelated business functions. A simplified view of each would state that the major function of marketing is to generate leads, while the major function of sales is to turn those leads into customers. This means that the more closely aligned your sales and marketing teams are, the more likely your conversion of prospects to customers is to be smooth and efficient. Ultimately, well-aligned sales and marketing departments deliver healthy business bottom lines.

But they're rarer than you might think. In too many businesses, sales and marketing exist in tension with each other. Perhaps neither fully understands or appreciates the other's challenges or outputs. Perhaps they seem to speak different languages. Perhaps each thinks that the other exists in competition with it, rather than in a symbiotic relationship.

How, then, can you create better synergy and harmony between your sales and marketing functions, and ultimately deliver more efficiency, innovation and profit?



The challenges

First, let's take a closer look at the challenges that can prevent sales and marketing from working effectively together.

A survey by Demand Gen Report suggests that the three biggest challenges when it comes to achieving sales and marketing alignment are: Communication; broken or flawed processes and different metrics used for measurement.

These will, of course, vary between sectors and individual businesses, but they give a good flavour of some of the main factors you should be considering when seeking to tighten the relationship between sales and marketing.

'Communication' can cover a whole range of issues. It genuinely can be a linguistic problem, whereby sales and marketing use competing terminology and consequently fail to properly understand the overlaps between their work. It can be a process issue, where the two teams aren't in the same place at the same time often enough. It could simply mean that sales and marketing don't communicate.

'Broken or flawed processes' often relates to the ways in which leads are passed between the two functions. What constitutes a lead, and how is its value measured? Alternatively, it could link back to communication, meaning that the two teams don't have the technologies and mechanisms to efficiently share information, ask questions and inform each other's work.

'Different metrics' is straightforward enough. Traditionally, sales teams are measured purely in terms of revenue – how much money are they bringing into the business? Meanwhile, marketing may be measured by a much broader range of metrics, and these might vary between campaigns or different strands of the overall marketing mix.

When it comes to aligning your sales and marketing functions better, it is useful to begin by considering these three common challenges. Think about how your business currently operates, and how these three areas might currently be causing friction or a lack of efficiency. From there, you can begin to develop a new strategy.

Take a lead: the role of senior management

It is imperative that any new strategy to align sales and marketing is led from the top. You absolutely need senior buy-in for it to work.

This has two key facets. First, the strategy should be led by senior management, giving it the impact and profile it needs to filter down through every individual in the business. Second, the heads of both sales and marketing need to be fully engaged and bought into the strategy, since they will be its figureheads and driving forces..

If the heads of sales and marketing are at the same level of seniority, then this process will likely run far smoother. If they are not, then senior management will need to work even harder to ensure that both functions take equal responsibility for the realignment process. Placing more onus on one side than the other is a recipe for tension.

In larger businesses, it may be helpful to hire someone to work at the intersection of sales and marketing, to better disseminate information and help pull the teams together. This might, for example, be an analyst with in-depth understanding of elements like the sales funnel and CRM data.

Focus on the customer journey

A great deal of sales and marketing disconnect is due to fragmented perceptions of the customer journey. There are two particularly common errors:

1. Seeing marketing as stage one and sales as stage two

The reality is that marketing and sales exist in a loop. Even after a lead has been converted into a sale, that individual or business will continue to encounter marketing. They will see your business's website, social media presence, advertising and PR. They will have a perception of what your business is like, and what its plans are for the future. They may come into contact with a customer service or aftersales support function – and, as outward-facing elements of the business, these are part of the marketing mix. Similarly, if a lead is not converted into a sale then that individual or organisation's customer journey may be seen as oscillating back towards marketing, as further efforts are made to finally bring them on board.

As such, when you are planning and communicating customer journey strategies, think of the journey as a symbiotic loop. The ultimate aim is to encourage each customer to continue circling that loop, engaging with your business and making additional purchases. For this to work successfully, sales needs to encourage future engagement with marketing material, just as marketing needs to encourage future sales.

2. Seeing the beginning of the customer journey as the first point of contact

Whether an email, a phone call or even a face-to-face meeting, too many companies track customer journeys from a point of human contact. But in today's content-driven world, potential customers' engagements with your business start far, far earlier. Perhaps they read a blog or an insight guide you have published. Perhaps they come across some of your posts on social media. Perhaps they see your logo in a sponsored publication, or read about you in the news.

All of these touchpoints are part of the customer journey. Sales can build far more personalised relationships with potential customers when they refer back to these touchpoints, rather than assuming that they are the first point of contact. But to do this effectively, sales needs to be absolutely aware of all of the content being produced by marketing



Targeted content

This leads us to the question of content. Case studies, data sheets, white papers, brochures, videos, online and offline – today’s marketing teams have a wealth of options when it comes to creating engaging, creative content.

However, content marketing should never happen in a vacuum. Sales personnel are the ones who get face-to-face with customers on a daily basis – which means that they are the best people for informing marketing about what is exciting, confusing or intriguing customers and potential customers. Content production should be directly informed by sales.

The trouble is that sales rarely has the time to record such customer feedback, much less pass it on to marketing in a convenient format. We’re back to communication and process, again. Some ways of avoiding this problem are:

- Schedule a regular sales/marketing meeting with the express purpose being content development. Don’t allow the agenda to get clogged with other issues – this session should be purely about providing feedback on existing content and generating ideas for new pieces.
- Take advantage of the tools and technologies that are available to encourage collaboration. Even shared file repositories can be highly effective, and tools like Dropbox and Google Drive are cost-effective for small businesses.