Unleashing the Value of Your SFA System

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Sales professionals resent sales force automation systems (SFA). They hate having to swap adrenaline-charged selling for tedious administrative tasks; they loathe being monitored like call center agents; and, most of all, they object to having their "black book" insurance policy commandeered by the "employer of the moment." All of which is why SFA has had the highest business case failure rate of all CRM systems - 80%, compared to an average of 55%, according to Gartner.

So do you give up on the idea of SFA and its benefits of process metrics and customer data to build sustainable relationships? Or is there another way to get Sales to use the system and unleash its value? What if, for example, you made your SFA system a means of professional enhancement for your salespeople, rather than a burden? What if it drove their adrenalin rush, rewarded team selling and augmented their insurance policy? Could such a feat be achieved?

Turning your SFA system into a knowledge system

The answer is yes, and it lies in exploiting content to transform your SFA system into a knowledge system, a corporate brain rather like the omniscient computers that run space ships in sci-fi movies. Such content has, of course, to be of high quality and reliability to become intelligence, so as homegrown data quality efforts struggle, many organizations are turning to external sources of professional content to feed directly into sales and customer information systems. In its 2007 survey of sales practices, CSO Insights found that sales knowledge management resources (including subscriptions to information-mining services, internal document-management portals, and internal tools for sharing best practices) were one of the key areas for upcoming investment.

Once revitalised by content, the purpose of this sales knowledge system would be to:

Provide useful intelligence to build professional reputations and support successful customer engagement – that is the sales force's motivation to use it

Collate, analyze and learn from input data in order to improve the overall sales process and understand each customer better – that is your organization's benefit

Selling is now customer engagement

In today's sales environment, sales force success and reputation are grounded in business knowledge, not product information. Customers want professional advisors who empathetically understand their business and how to improve it. Salespeople know this; they know they need to beat the competition with their knowledge of customers' needs and issues, not product functionality - which is why skills and coaching are high on the list of sales manager concerns.

> Sales reps today need the means to dive deep to answer specific technical questions, and fly high to provide purchase-justification arguments, impact assessments and solid business cases.
>
> Consultant in Sales Management

Achieving targets in this customer-focused world means the "product sales process" has to metamorphose into the "customer engagement process" (see Table 1). The knowledge system then oils the wheels of all engagement stages, providing sales and relationship staff with the relevant intelligence to have meaningful conversations with different members of the decision-making unit (DMU), at different times. To establish just what is really meaningful to the customer, sales professionals will need to use the business intelligence to put themselves in the customer's shoes - what are they thinking, doing and feeling at each stage of the buying process? What issues do they have and where can value be added?

> We are moving from an R&D / product company to a client communication capability company
>
> VP Sales & Marketing, Software Industry

Customer engagement requires intelligenceAs an example, let's take three important steps in the customer engagement process and examine how the intelligent use of content can increase business success at each stage.

Table 1 - Contrasting stages of the customer engagement process with stages of the product and customer ownership processes

Process Stage	Customer Engagement	Product Sale	Customer Ownership
1.	Create interest	Lead generation	Initial research
2.	Build interaction	Sales process	Buying process
3.	Open up to participation	After sales	Ongoing support and advice

1. Create Interest

The first step in the product sales process as we have known it is generating leads. However, the customer's buying process has kicked off much earlier with identifying a need or problem. Whereas in the past customers frequently requested information from suppliers at this stage, today's buyers are far more likely to do initial research themselves using the Internet (eg search and Webinars) and independent third parties (eg analysts and professional market advisors)

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If customers are less likely to come to you at their research stage, you need instead to reach out to them and create interest. To do this your employees should try and pinpoint event drivers, needs and the people likely to be undertaking such research, for example by:

Looking in news articles for people making planning applications
Monitoring industry journals for lists of companies liable for new safety legislation
Searching analyst reports for league tables of CRM skills in a particular industry
Scouring company reports for strategic objectives

2. Build Interaction

The buying process today is getting longer and involving more people in the decision-making unit. The right intelligence (in the right format), used with skill, is required to keep conversations with the DMU flowing and the process moving. In his book Spin Selling, best-selling author Nick Rackham talks about sales professionals seeing beyond the clients' wallets to their needs, in order to engage them. A good place to start is using professional network data, found on sites such as LinkedIn and in company reports. This helps sales professionals understand the people in the DMU – what makes them tick, how the seller can help them achieve their aims, and who and what they know.

Initial research is likely to have made potential customers knowledgeable about your market. Their preoccupation at this stage will be the business case and what your products can do for them specifically. For sales professionals to be in the best position, they need to have gained reciprocal understanding of the customer's business and market, firstly, to demonstrate their relationship skills and secondly, to help make a sound research-based business case, not just parrot "magic" ROI numbers.

A key sales aid for this stage is industry and company knowledge combined with skilled questioning to uncover requirements at different stages of the buying process. For example, your sales professional may pick up an item of competitor news on a BlackBerry just before a customer meeting. The customer has not yet heard the news and is impressed when it is mentioned during the conversation. The sales professional is now in an ideal situation to ask relevant questions about the customer's reaction, thereby gaining valuable knowledge and helping the customer think.

According to CSO Insights' 2007 Sales Optimization survey, currently 40% of salespeople's time is spent finding the right collateral for the situation; what is available is often too general and based on product features.

Your sales professionals also need to be ambassadors for your business. The customer has access to the Internet and to third-party comments about your company. Sales professionals should be on top of this – both to benefit from third-party proof points and to have an answer for the negatives, be they truthful or malicious.

3. Open Up to Participation

In a world of oversupply, organizations aim to retain customers for longer. But it is quality of relationship not length of time that increases profitability. Wise organizations try to deepen engagement, to move up the ladder from approved vendor to strategic contributor (see Table 2). That takes knowledgeable account managers who understand the customer's business and market.

Table 2 Relationship Ladder

Approved vendor – needs a good product or service
Preferred supplier – needs detailed knowledge of product usage by customer
Solutions advisor – needs to understand the customer's business
Strategic contributor – understands the customer's market and position

Each advancement on the ladder can pay off handsomely in increased credibility, access, margin, repeat business, decreased competition and shorter sales cycle. But strategic relationships are built on service, rather than sales. Customers, outside of procurement, will ask "do you help me do good business?" or "can you make my life easier?" and in many cases "have you 'gone 'native?' " ** Would your current content and intelligence support this?

** A term used by customer when suppliers are felt to meld into the customer's culture

Add services that build relationships; don't just think in terms of "after sales".

Sales Director – Transport Industry

Helping your sales staff look good and achieve target So how do you change your SFA system (or business case) into a knowledge system? After all, many a sales professional will already use Google to find out about potential customers and help them through the new buying process.

The broad answer is to make better-quality and hard-to-get content quicker and more convenient to find, in a format that is more useful to the sales professional, and with the addition of tools that enable collaboration and team selling. Google, after all, is a time-consuming, blunt instrument – it does not cover all relevant information sources, e.g., company data, and a lot of dross has to be sifted to find specific intelligence.

A key finding in the 2007 Gartner report "Use Content Management as a Competitive Sales Weapon" was that enabling staff to collaborate in the use and production of content on a CRM system – from key messages in proposals, to sharing insights from library information – yielded the optimum return on investment.

The shorter answer is to help your sales professionals "look good" in front of customers and achieve targets; if you can do that, they will use the system on an everyday basis. This carrot approach is often accompanied by the stick of management at each stage of the engagement process – but it is the carrot that cures blindness.

Salespeople really like the visual way we present data, particularly the company and competitors' radar maps; it encourages them to go into the CRM system every day. They've been asking us to integrate internal data into the same format.

Product Manager, Dow Jones

Imperatives for successful conversion of your SFA system

Other imperatives you need to consider for the success of a sales knowledge system, besides the quality and presentation of content, will be:

- Auditing and researching current intelligence available and what is needed
- Piloting the system with sales professionals as key figures defining the project
- Training on the use of market models, such as PEST (analysis of Political, Environmental, Sociological and Technological factors) and customer portfolio analysis
- Sales and marketing collaboration on collateral production
- Suggesting relevant customer questioning in light of contextual information
- Training on the IT system and the quality of content available
- A means by which sales professionals can help and support each other – the best way to learn how to turn content into intelligence is by experimentation and observing the value others get out of it
- Rewards that recognize customer value-add, in addition to sales targets achieved

I've done a lot of training with Sales to get them used to the technology and how it benefits them – the older generation in particular are used to doing things in a different way. I'd recommend that people always prepare relevant training materials, guides and ideas that are specific to their company.

Sales Support Manager

Tools for smarter sales

Content by itself is useful, but it is how you "get smart" with its relevance that is the real cornerstone of successful, competitive, customer engagement. There are some particularly beneficial information-access and social-networking tools emerging onto the market with high business value, if they are used by enthusiastic staff in the right team selling environment.

It is difficult to find the quick, relevant stuff on Google – there is so much noise.

Corporate Sales Advisor

Fact extraction

Unfortunately, search engines cannot yet understand the meaning of text. They extract keywords, but the results may have little relevance to a specific query – so time is wasted playing with keywords and searching through reams of results. Fact extraction saves time by enabling you to pre-define a particular "fact," such as an event, activity or relationship, together with a set of documents where it might be found. For example, fact extraction might search all press releases or company reports likely to have information on company revenue. It can then distill results into a short report and send this electronically to a PDA. Imagine a key pitch where you can answer a detailed question while still in the company of a potential customer. A more familiar example of fact extraction is the "clients who bought this also bought that" feature on Web sites such as Amazon.

We've been pulling off trends in a particular industry like health and property and putting them on the intranet.

Business Analyst

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Web harvesting

Web harvesting picks up where search engines leave off. Instead of you reading through search results and then copying and pasting information to a Microsoft Word document for analysis, Web harvesting examines a pre-determined set of content, such as chat rooms, blogs or news feeds, which it then puts into an indexed information set. Examples of such a set include competitors in a market by share, product prices over time, or ranked company financial data. These can then be searched again. Web harvesting thus improves the quality, speed and insight obtained from content. Other examples of Web harvesting are sites that collate all the professional data on a particular person.

There's a growing demand for data sources on the markets of the Middle East, China and Russia – a lot of useful Internet data is not in English.

Manager – Global Media Company

Social bookmarking

When staff find content such as blogs, quotes or documents that would be useful again for themselves or others, they bookmark it – just like adding a Web site to a favorites list in a browser, or the news cuttings book that used to be circulated weekly. These bookmarks can then be used as a trusted and tailored source of research on, for example, an industry area, or they can build up a library of new ideas for product development or usage. The social, and most valuable, application of bookmarking comes from employees creating a collaborative library for themselves. The Web site www.de.licio.us.com is an example of social bookmarking. But the danger of public sites for commercial organizations is that they make it easier for competitors to find out what projects your staff is working on.

Social tagging

When content is bookmarked it also needs to be tagged with single words or phrases, thereby indexing its content for future retrieval. Whereas in the past documents may have been kept in a single file marked "competitors," now a piece of content can have a number of tags so its information can be found and used in a variety of ways. Examples of tags would be key-competitor, Mark-Smith, product-launch, and highly-recommended. A key benefit of tagging is that you can use your own company jargon and segmentation for classification. Like social bookmarking, social tagging is a useful way of improving sales and marketing alignment; it also leaves a history of knowledge with an organization long after individual employees have left.

Bottom line

The role and purpose of the sales function is changing – customer engagement is now the name of the game, a professional reputation the new insurance policy, knowledge, research and collaboration the "smart" sales tools. Fortunately, this time around you don't have to throw out your SFA system for new knowledge software: embedded content management can open up an Aladdin's cave of opportunity for you and, most importantly, for your sales professionals.

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