



## Do You Believe in Magic?

*For all the talk of sales process, there's still an element that can't be reduced to hard numbers*

*by*

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**S**ales process. You hear about it everywhere. It's become axiomatic: **Get your process straight before you automate.** It's true, it's important, and it's provided a lot of consultants a good living. But is it real?

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If you ask consultants how sales happens, they'll say "process." If you ask sales reps what happens, they'll say "magic." And they're both right.

*Question:* Have you every pursued a sales opportunity and done everything correctly according to your own process, or perhaps a training program you went through, and at the end still lost the deal?

*Question:* Have you done everything wrong something like "Bill Murray does sales" and still had business fall into your lap?

If you answered yes to either or both of these questions, you've experienced magic. In the first instance it's bad and in the second good, but it's still magic. And to pretend that it doesn't exist invites all manner of trouble. Now, can we have a little less bad magic and a little more predictability of outcomes? The answer is yes, and it can pay big dividends, but you can't eliminate all magical events – and you may not want to.



## Here's Why

One of the main reasons to map sales processes is to attempt to improve them. Better process execution means improved consistency and predictability of expected revenues and results across the sales force. Enormous productivity gains are another benefit, by allowing you to better synchronize, allocate, and apply resources. (More on this next month). For the moment, suffice it to say, having a handle on what the process is, is a good thing.

Most of the work that's been done in process, process improvement, and automation comes from manufacturing. Much of what's been learned there can be applied in some fashion to sales. But some cannot. In manufacturing, standard inputs operated on with a standard process yields standard outputs. Key to enforcing all these standards is the ability to tightly control the quality conformance of the inputs, process execution, and outputs.

But controlling conformance in sales process, particularly execution (the stuff going on in the box) is not so straightforward. First, with field-based sales, what's actually being done is often occurring at a remote location. Unlike retail sales, where videos can be employed to inspect behavior and provide a basis for feedback, corporate sales take place in uncontrolled places.

Every situation the process is applied to is unique. Each call has its own array of variables, many of them emotional. Unlike a manufacturing environment, where rational, objective, and measurable actions occur, the environment of sales calls may have none of these.

### Is sales *art* or *science*?

Like the debate of heredity versus environment, the answer is - both.

Even if you were willing to pay for four-legged calls – sales rep and an observer or coach – what is the objective measure? The process says you're to identify and meet the various buying influences. You, as observer, tag along and, sure enough, the sales rep goes in, shakes hands, and a pleasant enough discussion ensues.

Did the rep execute the process? And how well?

Yes, you can observe that he or she shook hands with the prospect. But even an observable behavior (shaking hands) is subject to huge variation – the vice grip, limp wrist, dead fish, and so on – all meet the process requirement. But the nonverbal, totally subjective, and completely irrational aspects of something so seemingly simple demonstrate the problem of strictly extrapolating manufacturing's lessons to sales.



A much better indicator of how the process is being conducted is to record the buyer's actions and commitments. In our work with clients defining and documenting their sales processes, we always have them record what the buyer actions are at each of the milestone steps toward a sale. These actions should be observable and represent commitment on the part of the buyer to advance the sale.

## Record and Learn

So, in the example above, the buying influence also shook hands, but a more compelling action would be his or her identifying other key influencers and an expressed willingness to introduce the seller to them. This is observable, demonstrates some level of commitment, and moves the process toward completion.

In your search for sales automation, finding applications that provide the ability to record or check off buyer actions is an important criterion. Computing metrics and identifying successful patterns is how things can get better over time.

The opportunity management system component of many sales force automation programs claims to provide roll-up forecasts for groups (regions, countries, product lines, etc.), but if there's no clear quantifiable standard for what we're measuring, the numbers lack integrity. It's like collectively trying to build a structure, but having everyone using a differently calibrated yardstick. The result is chaos.

Having a single process definition that everyone measures with, and against, begins to provide the kind of detailed picture of operating reality and rational process improvement that sales management seeks – and moves toward the predictability senior management wants. Still, we're talking about people here, not machines.

The world is not a place filled with buying units and selling units, though many sales managers view it that way. "People buy from me because they like me," has been repeated often and may still hold some sway today. More likely, they buy from me because they felt I best understood their situation, had a solid product at a competitive (though not necessarily the lowest) price, and added the most value (or subtracted the least).

In the well-worn area of "value-added" anything, it's the buyer who determines what's valuable. The thing of value can be stability (the safe solution), Vision (the leading-edge solution), or an orientation toward establishing relationships (a long-term solution). Who's to say? With multiple buying influences for the same purchase, the key value could be different for each. Thus, the "soft" stuff of artistry.

Sales is a statistical event. Like baseball, I can't guarantee in late innings, men in scoring position, two out, and a full count, this particular guy will pitch a hard slider, but the scouting report says that's the best bet. And, over time, these patterns and information-based "hunches" can give the ever-so-slightest edge. Thus, the "hard" stuff of science.

Sensitivity, awareness, pace, tone, timing, process step, buyer actions, practice, practice, practice. Balancing the hard and the soft stuff and utilizing new tools. Thus, mastery.



The age-old question remains. Is sales art or science? Like the debate of heredity versus environment, the answer is - both. Could we be a little more scientific in our selling and marketing approach and gain significant sustainable improvement? The technology is now available to support doing so. Could these same tools provide insights to enable new levels of productivity, creativity, and mastery? Do you believe in magic?



Barry Trailer has consulted with companies with complex B2B sales for the past twenty years. At FrontRange Solutions (formerly GoldMine Software Corporation) he served as VP of North American Sales, VP of Corporate Initiatives, and finally, acting as President of the GoldMine Division. In 2002 Barry interviewed hundreds of executives for the just released '*Sales & Marketing Excellence Challenge: Changing How the Game Is Played*,' available at [www.csinsights.com](http://www.csinsights.com)