And the Word Was Process

Sales process is as unique and individual as your company…and your customers

by

Barry Trailer

AT THE FIRST DCI SALES FORCE AUTOMATION CONFERENCE IN BOSTON, IN NOVEMBER 1994, I WAS THE ONLY PRESENTER SPEAKING ON SALES PROCESS AND MY FIRM WAS ONE OF TWO EXHIBITORS THAT HAD AN OPPORTUNITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM. SIX MONTHS LATER, in Santa Clara, I was one of six speakers specifically discussing sales process, and about 75 vendors said, "Opportunity Management System? Yeah, we've got that." At a software forum in Atlanta in July 1997 I was a keynote the first afternoon, and by mid-morning sales process had been referred to so many times I was already hackneyed. Everyone, it seems, was talking about process.

Last month we explored the vagaries of process as it applies to sales. In this article we'll look at why process has become so popular and the potential it holds for becoming more so.

To a large extent, sales operations have operated on an *informal* basis. Sales reps and their managers have been measured and rewarded primarily, if not exclusively, on their results. Making the number, quote attainment and "What have you sold lately?" have been, literally, the order of the day.

So where does process fit into this picture? While there have been significant penalties for not making the number, witnessed by the revolving door of sales reps and vice presidents of sales, there has also been damn little accountability. Several years ago, a VP took strong exception to my saying this. His position was, "Sales is totally accountable. If we don't make our number, we're fired!"

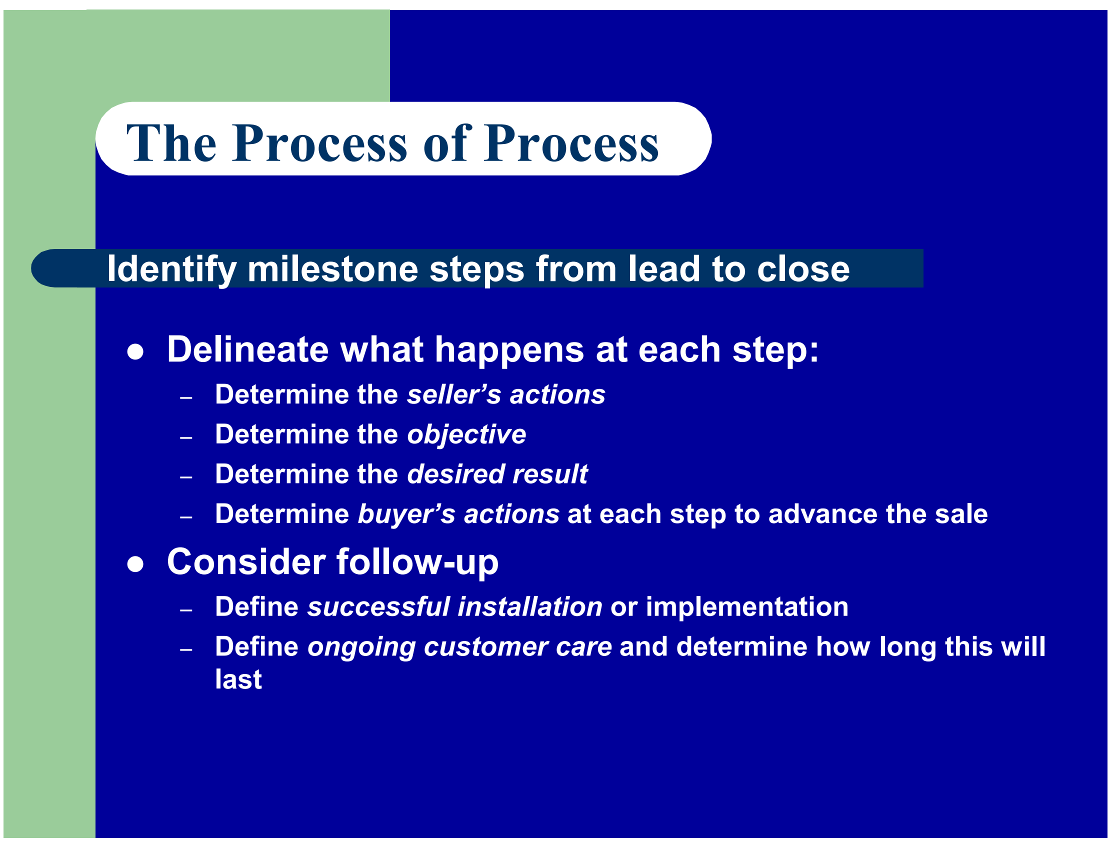
This is akin to the U.S. Post Office guaranteeing overnight delivery. "So this will get there tomorrow?" Yes. "This really needs to be there, so you're saying it'll be delivered tomorrow." Absolutely. "Okay, so tomorrow for sure." Yes, and if it isn't, we'll give you your money back. "I don't want my money back, I want this there tomorrow!"

Which is why FedEx continues to make a good living.

Sales says, “Yep, we can do it. It’ll be tough, but give use the resources, and we can definitely do it. And if we don’t, you can fire me.” Newsflash: Companies do not want to fire their sales team. Turnover in field sales is horrendously expensive. Recruiting, hiring, and ramping up new sales reps is time consuming, costly, and only gets you back to square one. But we continue to see turnover in the ranks and at the top of sales forces due to lack of accountability.

Senior management today is not looking to fire people and is not looking to buy sales automation tools. Senior management is looking for measurable, predictable, sustainable, continuously improving business results.

Enter process.



What’s Your Process?

Process is the roadmap by which we get things done. In sales, everyone has one, whether they’re conscious of it or not. Usually, their processes are not clearly articulated, almost never documented and almost always individual.

Whether you envision a pipeline, a funnel, or a “black box”, leads come in one end and, those that make it through, become orders out the other end. In my work with clients, I facilitate groups in defining and documenting their sales processes. This provides the foundation for what their opportunity management system should do.

Participants identify milestone steps from lead (when a qualified lead enters the pipeline) through close (when an order is received). Surprisingly few companies have actually documented what this “ideal” sequence is, although the absence of it is felt regularly. If you’ve ever heard a manager saying, “We’re doing too many proposals,” or, “We’re doing demos too early,” then you’re hearing the impact of ill-defined process.

Companies that have bothered to outline their milestones will usually go on to delineate “what we do at each step.” These are the *seller’s actions*. In addition, we have clients define *the objective of each step* (why we’re doing it), the *desired result* (how we know the step’s been completed), and the *buyer’s actions at each step to advance the sale*.

If participants cannot clearly articulate a compelling reason for each step, the step itself may be unnecessary. The desired result of each step is defined so that sales reps can determine where they are in the process and what progress has been made, regardless of which specific actions have or have not been completed. This is a critical distinction, because it recognizes the process as a guide rather than a set of commandments.

New sales reps value having a detailed checklist to give them direction. Veterans appreciate the fact that they still have latitude and retain judgment about whether a certain tactic is to be done out of sequence, or at all. The OMS should be flexible enough to accommodate these variations.

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Tracking for Improvement

Keeping track of actual sales cycles as they proceed and analyzing these for winning approaches, extraneous steps, identifying bottlenecks, and so forth, are the stuff of process improvement. You should make certain the OMS component of the SFA application you buy has this capability. If it doesn't, you're simply repeating the sad history of creating one more nonliving document that is obsolete the moment it's completed.
The ability to track not only the selling cycle but also the buying cycle is integral to real forward motion. In a seven-step process (lead through close), a seller can perform all his actions and be at step 7, while the buyer is still way back on step 2.

One of my favorite tests for this: Imagine you've gotten a team together, flown in resources from all over the country for this key demo, and just as you're about to go into the meeting, your buyer contact greets you at the door. Her first words are, "Glad to see you! We're really excited about hearing your team present today. Only one thing, Mr. Big couldn't make it today. But let's get started right away."

Of course, Mr. Big was the central figure and the main reason justifying bringing all these resources together. Ever happen to you?

If so, or something like it, you know the significance of tracking buyer actions. Has the buyer identified the attendees for your meeting? Have they confirmed those attendees again, two days before the meeting? And so on. Sure, last minute emergencies can crop up. But if you're getting things like "Don't worry, I'll make certain the right people will be there," or "I can't really give you the names of participants or allow you to talk to them beforehand," then think twice before heading for the airport.

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Follow-Up

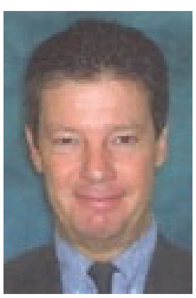
Final point. Whatever the number of steps are from the time a lead enters your pipeline until it leaves, we invite clients to consider these two follow-up steps.

Step 1: What does successful installation or implementation look like in terms of objective, desired result, seller actions, and buyer actions?

Step 2: What does ongoing customer care look like, and *how long does this step last* before being restarted or handed off to someone else?

If your answer is customer care never ends, then you have infinitely long sales cycles – a problem many companies face. Next month we'll look at where sales process fits into what we've labeled CARE: Customer Acquisition, Retention & Expansion. Sales process is the heart of this model and the basis for measuring, predicting, sustaining and improving results. This basic model also is about transforming sales from informal and unaccountable operations to *formal and measurably improving* process execution.

Everyone's talking about process. What are you doing about it?



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.csoinsights.com