NINE WAYS TO GET YOUR SALESPEOPLE TO FOLLOW UP ON MORE LEADS

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Despite advances in CRM, Marketing Automation, and Lead Management, there are still too many leads that get poor or no follow-up once they are passed to sales. It is a symptom of the ongoing conundrum between Sales and Marketing about lead definition and quality, as well as the communication breakdown that occurs between the two groups, and between the prospect and the provider.

Having experience with this “white space” between Sales and Marketing for over a decade, we have been able to time-test methods that impact follow-up effectiveness, effort, and efficiency. These methods can be used before leads get passed to the sales reps. The tips below are just a handful to get started with, but implementing these can show immediate results and improvements in follow-up success, which keeps the dialog going with your prospects. Sales teams include reps with a high level of success in following up on leads, as well as reps that have consistent challenges with that first follow-up effort. Making a few adjustments to your process can make everyone more effective.

Lack of effective follow up on leads is a chronic challenge for Sales and Marketing organizations. Both the Aberdeen Group and IDC released studies several years back showing that up to 70% of leads didn’t get a follow up from sales if there wasn’t a short term opportunity. More recent reports show that figure has been reduced, but there is still a delta between the leads generated and leads followed up personally by reps. While many companies are adopting marketing automation, partly to address this “white space” between generated leads and follow ups, the need for direct contact early with large opportunity prospects will never be obsolete.

The enterprise buying landscape has changed drastically over the last two years due to budget constraints, and providers need to align their selling with the current behavior of buyers. The “old rule” was to postpone follow up, or nurture a lead until there was a deal, then the rep would get involved. That approach is still being used in many organizations today. This may work in some cases, but buyers generally respond to early engagements very positively. The “new rule” is to engage early and open a dialog in the developing stages of the buy cycle, in order to secure involvement at the later buying stage. Trends show that consultative selling is getting results in today’s business climate.

Here are some ways you can get started today in improving your team's follow-up on leads:

Have a clear engagement roadmap for your reps to follow

This seems obvious, but the lead handoff is a critical stage in the sales process, and can be an awkward step if there isn't a clear series of steps. Sometimes leads are sent over with little or no information. This makes it difficult for the rep to determine what the next step with the prospect should be. In this case it is instinctive for them to look for the path of least resistance, or low hanging fruit, which puts opportunities at risk. As part of your lead delivery, it is best to include information that enables the rep to properly follow up, based on the prospect's original interaction or area of interest.

Give them a follow-up model

Establish the model that your reps should use for following up on leads. It can take multiple attempts to engage a prospect for the first time. If a rep gets a lead, calls once, and waits for a response, the prospect may not respond. The rep may then see it as a bad lead. If your reps understand that prospects often work in interrupt-driven environments, those reps can then see the need to increase the volume and frequency of attempts to reach a prospect. It isn't that your prospects aren't interested; it's that they have dozens of people competing for their attention. It takes some work to cultivate the relationship until it is reciprocal.

Understand the prospect's expectation of the follow-up

Provide some context for the rep's follow-up interaction. Where did this prospect come from? What do they want to know? What do they see as next steps? If the rep follows up with something beyond or different than the prospect's interest, that prospect can easily drift away before really knowing what your solution is. The first time the prospect reads in an email, or hears on a voicemail something they weren't originally interested in, they may think, "this isn't what we need". It then becomes more difficult to engage them further. The rep may be tempted to get them information on your entire product range in that first contact, however, it is better to stick to what the prospect expects to see from you and remember that less is better in your initial follow-up.

Provide as much information as possible in your leads

Do you have any historical information about this prospect? Are they already in your system? Has your company spoken with them before? Did they click on a link or attend an event? Give the rep as much context as possible in the lead so that they have the best understanding of the prospect. This helps them immensely to determine the best possible follow-up strategy. The more the rep is empowered with information, the more effective they can be in the follow-up. One of the major reasons leads often don't get a follow-up is because the rep doesn't have enough data to work with. They may handle this by putting off dealing with that lead while other leads came across their desk that are easier to engage. The follow-up window has an expiration date. The more the rep knows, the more aggressively they will pursue a lead.

Take the time to vet leads before they go to the reps

In some cases, lists that haven't been scrubbed will end up assigned to reps. Prospect names that shouldn't be called will get calls, with the result that the source of the leads loses credibility. Unfortunately these occurrences tend to be viral among reps. Marketing assumes that the rep should know what leads to call and Sales loses confidence in Marketing-generated leads. Whomever is responsible for new lists (Marketing or Sales) should review the list and for any obvious, non-viable prospects. If your reps have to vet their own leads, it can bury the good leads in process that guarantees that they don't get a prompt follow-up. Spend some time upfront to take a look to see if there are names/leads that shouldn't be assigned and pull those from your lead lists. It will streamline your sales process and create more confidence in the lead source.

Enable Visibility and Accountability

Providing visibility to your lead status and follow-up activity creates accountability for, and exposure of, any broken areas in your lead assignments process. Utilizing reporting from your CRM or lead management tools will provide insight into sales cycles, such as what is working, what isn't, and where leakage occurs in the process. Your team may encounter what I earlier called the "white space" between Marketing and Sales. This represents the space where leads are sent over from one group to the other and where they live until they show some activity. Within the "white space" are leads that didn't receive any follow-up for a variety of reasons, along with leads where there was initial follow-up, but not *follow through*. Visibility into this space via reports, and accountability for who owns a lead at any given time in the process, will increase the effort made in handling these leads. Putting a follow-up window or timeframe in place for lead follow-up, and escalating when that window isn't met is an effective way to keep leads from falling through the cracks.

Follow-up with the next follow-up in mind

Encourage capturing meaningful notes on conversations. One of the reasons momentum is lost with prospects is after some time lapses the information in the record isn't as fresh in a rep's mind. It is natural to think one will remember something when speaking with a prospect, but time and dozens of other conversations can impact that. Also account and territory assignments change and information isn't shared in that transition.

Aggregating sales intelligence into actionable data points is an important step to effective lead nurturing and follow-up. IDC's Research Vice President, Michael Gerhard, stated in a recent report that “one of the things that goes wrong is that a “prospect’s information is not communicated properly as the leads progress through the organization”.

This can impact the process in a variety of ways. One of the ways we’ve seen ,is that the prospects’ comments and information may not get properly captured and attached to the lead record—or when it is attached it isn’t done in a way that would be intuitive for the rep to find. There has to be some partnering between Sales and Marketing, in this aspect of lead development, to advance it to closed business. Establishing some basic data capture processes and feedback loops is very important, as well as putting more context around follow ups that have occurred, so that automated communication can build on live conversations.

Modify lead scoring models

Lead scoring needs to be appropriate for the selling landscape, which means traditional BANT scoring criteria may not be the correct approach to determining when to send leads to Sales. Developing an advanced scoring model that factors in how your clients are buying, is critical. Holding onto leads longer with automated communication misses the opportunity to build an individual relationship with your prospect. That can diminish trust and confidence and even interest in your solution and your people. Effective marketing automation can build on early engagements to enhance and reinforce conversations, but shouldn’t replace them. Use automation to imprint the last conversation and create an opportunity to keep the dialog going.

Think “fewer clicks” when delivering leads

The footprint reps need to cover is growing, and so are the platforms that organizations use to manage leads and sales activity. Remember that closing business is the rep’s primary objective, so map your sales enablement systems to that objective. If a rep has to open a record, and click though it to open files, click on other links, open a new platform, fill out forms, and other related tasks just to understand who they are calling, this adds cycles and slows down follow up efforts. Ways to optimize this are:

- Composite applications
- Present leads with more comprehensive information
- Talk to reps and see how they are using systems to understand how to best optimize with actual usage in mind
- Keep critical data less than 2 clicks deep—having easy access to conversation records, quote info, company descriptions, historical data, all help the rep to act sooner

In Summary

- Have a clear engagement roadmap for your reps to follow
- Give them a follow-up model
- Understand the prospect’s expectation of the follow-up
- Provide as much information as possible in your leads
- Take the time to vet leads before they go to the reps
- Enable Visibility and Accountability
- Follow up with the next follow-up in mind
- Modify lead scoring models
- Think “fewer clicks” when delivering leads

Many of the breakdowns in the follow-up process are related to lack of communication around lead delivery. Making process and workflow adjustments will show immediate improvements. Thousands of dollars are invested in generating leads. The ROI on those dollars is reduced by every lead with no follow-up. Take a step back and examine your lead assignment/delivery processes and workflow. See where you can create a more follow-up friendly model. Look at your Marketing Automation and CRM systems and see where you are lacking visibility to follow-up cycles, and spend some time creating an environment where leads are delivered with the most information and direction for your teams. Cooperation from both sides will narrow the percentage of leads that don’t get coverage, and build more confidence in new ones that are generated.

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