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Bad Sales Calls

Why They Happen And What The SE Can Do About Them

A highly entertaining exercise we run during one of our workshops poses the question "What percentage of sales calls that you participate in would you call poor/bad?" We then spend a little time defining what poor/bad actually means. It usually translates to a grade of C+ or worse on the classic education scale of A+ to F. The workshop average is always over 30%, often over 50% and many times hits 60%. That is an awful lot of time that, in the opinion of the Sales Engineers, is just wasted. A large proportion of calls do not move the opportunity towards closure and in many cases may drag it backwards!

So Why Do Bad Sales Calls Happen And What Can The Sales Engineer Do?

1. Let's Start With A Definition

Different countries use different grading systems. [It's a mess out there!](#) We will say that any call that fails to achieve a 70% grade is a Bad Sales Call. That is still a little subjective, so base that grade on achieving the primary objective/success criteria of the call. (So if the call has no success criteria it automatically fails - which is both a great outcome and a valuable lesson!).

Now think about every sales call/customer interaction you have experienced in a set time-frame (I suggest between three and six months). What percentage were bad, or good, depending on how you categorize them. For those that failed the 70% test make a list of why they failed. To get a little more granular you can sub-divide the calls between basic tasks such as Discovery, Demonstrations, Presentations and Follow-Up Calls. Do whatever makes sense for you.

Now examine the list.

2. Your View Of Why They Failed

I'm prepared to bet that you have items on your list such as:

Poor Preparation	No Agenda	No Discovery	Wrong Audience
Not Enough Time	Wrong Product	No Money/Budget	No Pain/Problems
Technology Failed	Bad Demo	Talked Too Much	Wrong Strategy

There will be others that are specific to your company, services or situation - but these will be the basics from the viewpoint of the Sales Engineer team. Now prioritize these to get down to the top three reasons (as you have to start somewhere!)

3. Sales View Of Why They Failed (Optional)

It is an interesting exercise to speak with your sales counterparts about these calls. I certainly wouldn't advise doing that from the view using bad sales calls/failure as your conversation point, so approach the conversation instead from the viewpoint of further improving the outcome. You'll be stunned to learn that your sales counterpart will consider a far higher percentage of those calls to be successful.

Putting aside the behavioral differences of salespeople and presales engineers, as there will always be a gap, you will learn that the larger the perceived gap in success rate, the more opportunity you have to communicate about preparing for a call.

4. Back To The Top Three Reasons

Now look some more at those top three reasons. How much of that, either directly or indirectly, is under your control? The key issue here is not to act as a victim and just complain. It is easy to shift the blame over to sales, particularly if you are in a transactional, inside or SMB type environment. Yet the point is that YOU allow yourself to get on a customer/prospect call when you have no idea who you are talking to, why they need your product or if you can even help them. By doing this you enable bad behavior from the salespeople that you work with.

For the majority of SE teams, the top reasons all ultimately come back to poor planning and preparation. This is a classic area of friction between sales and presales. Sales wants to accelerate deals through a pipeline and cannot understand why you need to talk to the customer when they have already had an initial conversation. Sales also gets upset when you stray into the areas of qualifying deals (as you sound just like their manager). Meanwhile presales find themselves getting on the phone or preparing a pitch when they

have no true idea of what the target is. Why is sales moving so fast when there is so little we know and probably an opportunity to grow the deal size? The key is to find a good balance - presales will never get all the preparation and discovery they want; whilst sales shouldn't expect to slam every deal through the pipeline to meet a monthly or quarterly goal.

5. Improving The Grade

The outcome of the balance is to slowly improve the grade level of sales calls. Making a drastic change is rarely successful, so start by modifying or eliminating some of the worst behaviors. Going to sales management and saying "we believe we can improve xx% (pick a number) of our sales calls and make them more successful - resulting in a bigger and better pipeline and an increased closure rate" is a better proposition than complaining about a 50% bad call rate. Classic changes are:

- a) No First Call Demos. Listen More.
- b) Restricting the Corporate Overview To One Slide
- c) Always Include "Do Nothing" As A Competitor
- d) Talk About Other Customers
- e) Set an Agenda and Success Criteria For Every Call

Summary

It's all about measurement. You need to determine if it is a problem before you try to fix it, and then use data to put a positive plan in place. Publicize your successes and move onto the next bad sales call reduction strategy. I've seen companies drop their rate from 50 to under 30% inside six months. That's a massive gain in productivity, morale and revenue!

"Should-haves, might-haves and maybe solve nothing. It's the next thing to happen that needs thinking about."

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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ⁱ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grading_\(education\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grading_(education))