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How Many SE's Does It Take To Sell A Solution?

Part 2 – The Solution

"Back up the truck – we need to take six different SE's for this demonstration."

In Part I of this series I detailed the typical corporate history of a world-wide sales division as it moves from a single product to a multi-solution focus. The increase in revenue brings along an associated increase in organizational complexity and bureaucracy.

What can pre-sales, sales and indeed the entire company do so that the answer to *"How Many Sales Engineers Does It Take To Sell A Solution?"* is *"Not As Many As You Think It Does!"* Here are some ideas, some best practices and a few controversial thoughts about how to reduce the number of sales and presales staff it takes to get a large deal. Some are entirely under the control of Pre-sales while others are not, yet all are achievable with some co-operation.

The Ultimate Goal

The ultimate goal of organizational efficiency within a complex sales organization is to minimize the number of staff who need to get involved (and therefore get paid) on a transaction yet maximize the win-rate. Since most sales organizations don't directly measure the cost of each sale I have ignored that factor. At this point you should re-read Part I to recall the current complexity – in terms of multiple product lines, sales and presales overlays, verticals, corporate politics, internationalization, "solution selling", strategic accounts and various levels of management.

The Solution For Multiple Solutions

1. Measure It! Seriously. Often the "*too many SE's*" is more perception than reality. So for a 6-8 week period, track the number of sales and presales heads per call, broken down by solution area, specialty, vertical and any other meaningful category

that makes sense for your business. As an aside you ask each member of the presales team to grade the effectiveness of the sales call (not the sales team, but the call) from A to F. You would be amazed at the results. Without this step it is hard to separate emotion and anecdotal evidence from quantitative facts. If you don't have hard quantitative measures of specific pre-sales skills around business, solutions and technology then you'll need that too.

2. Build A World-Wide SE Curriculum – Now! Instead of being reactive to the market and to customers become proactive. Sit down with Marketing and Product Development to map out all initiatives and product releases for the next 12-18 months. Ramp up the Pre-sales team a month or more before any major campaign or release. Create ambassadors/wizards/gurus and spread them out throughout the entire SE team across the world. Planning in this way prevents you from having to fly 'that one guy" across the continent for a single sales call.

3. Recognize There Are Multiple Flavors Of A Sales Engineer. The one size fits all category of an SE vanishes very quickly once the one-to-one pairing of a SE to a salesrep breaks. I'm not talking about Senior and Principal level SE's, but the role of either being a Technical SE (POCs, Complex Demos, benchmarks) or a Solution oriented SE (Discovery, Solution Design, Simple ROI, Multi-Solution Control). Value each kind of SE exactly the same – moving from a Technical SE to a Solution or Business SE is a career choice, not a promotion.

4. Beware The Sales Overlay. Sales overlays occur for three main reasons. Firstly because of Mergers & Acquisitions, secondly because of new technology or a new market, and most commonly because of either poor enablement or faulty compensation of the "regular" sales force. When a general all-portfolio rep is paid on overall revenue attainment rather than on having to fill specific solution buckets, bad things happen. For example, a rep with a 3m quota selling solution sets A,B and C should be required to sell at least 500k of each A,B and C to qualify for club and accelerators. Otherwise reps will naturally (a) stay in their product comfort zone and (b) throw resource at all other opportunities to compensate. When sales reaches a point that every part of their quota is overlaid by someone else – that shows the model is too complex.

5. Beware the Presales Overlay. Question every Pre-sales Engineering overlay position – especially in view of data gathered from point #1. If the position exists because of M&A or new market activity, a compensated goal of the team should be to

mainstream their knowledge and put themselves out of business in 12-18 months. If the position exists because of specialized knowledge and skills – see point #11 about centralization.

6. Pre-Sales Mirrors Development & Engineering. The more discrete islands of product development and engineering there are (in effect the more lines of business sales has to sell), then the more natural it is to group SE's under those lines of business. The LOB's are usually formed because of internal convenience and politics rather than for customer convenience. Analyze which products are most commonly cross-sold across solution sets and adjust presales (and sales) enablement accordingly. You will usually find other cross-sell opportunities which are ignored because of integration and training difficulties.

7. Pre-Sales Also Mirrors Sales. The more complexity in the sales organization, especially in overlays, verticals, country managers and so on, the more than will be reflected in the presales organization. As a rule, providing a single point of contact into presales for a first-line sales manager is the way to go. This can act as a buffer or shield for presales when sales re-organizes. It is only the 1:1 mapping that may need to change as opposed to dozens or hundreds of individual contributors who value their current teams and managers. Standard organizational theory promoted by McKinsey and others tell us that it takes 6-9 months for an organization to settle down and adjust once major changes have been made. Constant organizational change increases the "*too many*" problem as trusting relationships have not yet been built.

8. Establish (and pay for) a Mentoring Program. One of the major reasons for "too many SE's" is lack of skills. Simply put – someone has the skills, someone else does not, and the skills need to be transferred. One of the requirements for becoming a Master/Principal level SE is that a certain amount of mentoring needs to occur. On-the-job type training is a far more effective way to learn than classes and webcasts. This also helps to eliminate the "Lone Wolf Syndrome" – where only one person has the skills and always finds a reason why those skills cannot be effectively shared.

9. Pick A Sales Process – and stick with it! Many companies have a sales process of the year, which usually depends on some corporate decision or the arrival of a new sales VP. My advice? Stop switching – pick one that works and stick with it. A sales process, when correctly implemented, is the best friend of a pre-sales organization

as it promotes discipline within the selling (and buying) process. Deals are properly qualified earlier in the cycle, there is more focus on discovery, and there are far fewer "just in case" attendees at sales calls because expectations have been correctly set. By following point #1 – "measure it" – you'll see how many "just in case" resources are wasted because of poor qualification/discovery.

10. Use Partners. My experience tells me that small to medium-sized partners are often a great source of assistance. Particularly in the RFP stage and during technical validation (Evaluations & Trials). Granted this is really substituting someone else's headcount for yours – but it is effective.

11. Centralize Specific SE Resources. There are certain presales skills which should be centralized at a national or regional level. Natural examples are brand new products, fading/mature technologies, complex integrations and highly specialized capabilities such as benchmarking or executive workshops – all of which are organizationally dependent. These groups should either have a mandate of contracting in or expanding out as revenue dictates. For example, instead of having an expert on new product "X" in each of 16 sales districts, you can centralize the function into a national 8-10 person team instead. Then either the team expands out to 16 by assigning one person into each sales area and dissolving, or eventually contracts down to zero and the knowledge is mainstreamed into the general presales community. The best case for permanent centralized teams lie with cross-solution integrations or with developing an architectural "practice" analogous to deep services expertise.

12. Certify. Everyone. Together. In a real-life situation with sales and pre-sales paired up in groups solving a customer scenario. Make everyone work together by training them that way. Sales cannot succeed/pass/certify without Pre-sales and vice versa. Make it a condition of employment – nothing drives wasted effort out of the sales cycle like teamwork and respect – and this is the fastest way to build it within a complete sales team. Sadly very few organizations take this approach.

Summary

Like most organizational problems, the first thing to do is to define how large a problem it really is – think of this as performing internal discovery upon your sales call process. Pre-sales Engineers are naturally more inclined to share their toys and their skills than salespeople – so some monetary and simple recognition incentives are usually the way to proceed when encouraging skill transfer. Then question every overlay position in both sales and presales and put a plan in place as to how the overlay can be dissolved in 12-18 months. If it is not feasible then you have a true overlay, otherwise task the overlay team with putting itself out of business (with a job guarantee). Next ask if your organization is designed the way it is because of internal reasons or if it is for the convenience of the customer. Concurrent with these activities is to pick a single sales process, stick with it and enforce it from the top – ban excel forecasts and pipelines. Finally enable sales and pre-sales together in some of the basics and then test them together in a customer scenario – so that everyone pulls their weight in the team.

"Fools ignore complexity. Pragmatists suffer it. Some can avoid it. Geniuses remove it."

"Simplicity does not precede complexity – but follows it"

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