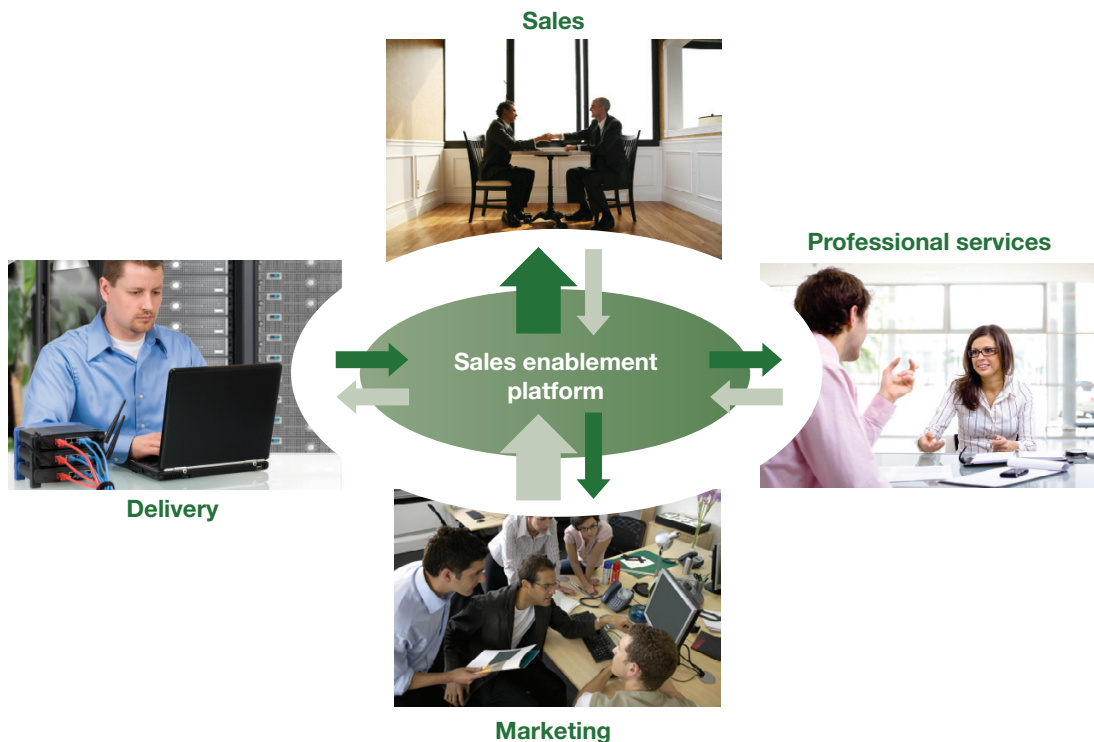


Sales enablement platforms – needs and benefits

Salespeople volunteer for a tough job. The complexity of what they sell and the sophistication of the people they sell to increase year by year. In this environment every sales interaction and conversation is important, which is why the best salespeople spend so much time preparing for their conversations with customers and creating the materials they will use.

But salespeople are often not well served by the resources they are given to prepare for these conversations. The problem resides at two levels: the quality of sales materials is often poor and it is hard to find the right resources, even if they do exist. The concept of the sales enablement platform – a knowledge management tool for sales – has arisen as a solution to the second of these problems. This article outlines the requirements for an effective sales enablement platform and analyses the benefits.



The sales enablement platform provides a 360° view of sales resources

What customers want

Customers have grown out of having products sold to them; they have even tired of solutions selling. Now they want to buy on the basis of business outcomes. The communications company doesn't want an improved customer loyalty system; it wants customers that stay longer and spend more. The manufacturer no longer wants an improved supply chain solution; it wants lower supply costs and on time delivery. And they want to look at all the options for achieving their desired outcome.

One consequence is that customers expect salespeople to explain how they can deliver outcomes. They are looking for salespeople to share a point of view, not just ask questions. Customers want to work with salespeople who bring business knowledge from a wide range of different situations; salespeople who can contribute new business ideas.

What salespeople say they need

- **One source** – I don't want to have to search through multiple, unconnected information silos, arranged arbitrarily e.g. according to product set, department, country
- **The big picture** – I need the high level view so I can spot related offerings and cross and up sell opportunities
- **Concise and complete** – I want just the resources that are relevant now, not loads of extraneous stuff. But it must be all the resources, from all departments
- **Arranged for me** – I don't want to have to be an expert on the portfolio to get to the resources I need
- **In my language** – it must respond to the words I use
- **Responding to the sales context** – e.g. the stage of sale, technical vs business
- **Linking me to people who can help** – I want to connect to salespeople who have been here before me, and to the expert behind the resource
- **Listening to me** – I'd like the opportunity to comment and share information. I'd like to be updated on topics that I choose

What salespeople need

The sales cycle can be viewed as a series of interactions or conversations with the customer. Each sales interaction has a specific set of objectives: it must change a viewpoint, unearth information, resolve a concern, solve a problem or provide needed information.

Knowing this, and understanding the customer's expectations, it is apparent that the salesperson, when preparing for a sales conversation, needs to be able to marshal a wide range of information and structure it according to the context and objectives of each different situation. Salespeople need better information systems to help them do this, and the sales enablement platform has evolved to address this need.

What's the problem?

Typically, current tools do not meet the information needs of salespeople – see call out box "*What salespeople say they need*". These shortfalls are damaging because salespeople rely on sales resources to fuel the engine of sales conversations – no fuel, no progress.

The impact – sales efficiency

Much has been written about the impact of these problems on salesforce productivity. For example, IDC

research says that on average each week a salesperson spends:

- 6.4 hours creating presentations
- 5.8 hours searching for client-related information
- 2.3 hours searching for marketing collateral

Clearly, if these processes could be speeded up sales would be more efficient. For example, for a salesforce of 500, saving one hour each week is worth over €500k each year in simple efficiency savings. That means getting more sales out of the same size salesforce or accommodating salesperson wastage without loss of sales.

Significant as this is, Solutions for Sales believes that it is the potential improvement in sales effectiveness delivered by the sales enablement platform that offers the most significant gains.

The impact – sales effectiveness

We have argued that customers expect a higher quality of interaction with their sales contacts. They want business advice; they want a balanced view; they want to focus on their desired business outcome not the salesperson's desired sales outcome. To meet these customer expectations salespeople need to tap into a wide range of resources and quickly find all that is available to make the next sales interaction successful.

This is something salespeople are not doing well according to statistics from IDC, which show that:

- 33% of all unsuccessful deals could have been won if the seller had been better informed and had acted more client-oriented
- 57% of customers feel that salespeople are poorly prepared or not prepared at all at initial meetings
- More than 50% of customers expect salespeople to be better informed about client-specific requirements and goals

If accessing sales resources is difficult or laborious, it is our experience that the salesperson's patience runs out long before all relevant resources have been discovered. The result is sales meetings that fall into the 57% that customers judge to be poorly prepared and sales opportunities that end up in the 33% that would have been won if the salesperson had been better informed.

The most significant benefit of a good sales enablement platform is that it improves the quality of the sales conversation, which results in more wins. When it comes to quantifying this benefit there are so many other factors at play that it is hard to provide objective figures. Readers must judge for themselves, but if it is accepted that salespeople who are better

prepared for sales meetings can achieve a 1% higher win rate, then for a company with sales of €250 million the result would be an extra €1.5 – €2.5 million of sales each year. And there's another important benefit: the salesperson that demonstrates the ability to talk outcomes with their customer gains visibility of more sales opportunities.

Marketing has needs too

Sales enablement platforms are not just for sales. Marketing has a whole range of requirements in this area – see callout box “*What CMOs say they need*”.

Producing the best sales resources

People all round the company have information that can help sales. Of course the main producers are Products, Marketing and Sales themselves, but there are others. In some companies Professional Services and Consulting divisions have information on the services they offer, their expertise and their processes, methods and tools. They may produce opinion pieces and white papers. This is valuable material in a complex sales process. Delivery and Operations can provide performance statistics and quality measures that are useful sales ammunition, and customers want to know about the design, implementation and support services available to them.

What CMOs say they need

- **Drive Sales** – I need to have better ways of steering Sales in the direction the company wants to go
- **Satisfy Sales** – I want to provide the sales resources that salespeople need. I am sick of hearing them say that Marketing is no help
- **Economise on Marketing resource** – I would like to know which resources are valued by sales so I can save money by stopping doing what's not wanted
- **Improve visibility** – I want to see who's using what, which resources are getting old, and what the coverage is of sales resources across the portfolio
- **Develop a broader view** – I'd like people to have a better understanding of the breadth of our capability and the positive synergies across our portfolio
- **Exploit all our resources** – I want everyone to be able to contribute to selling, including organisations like professional services and delivery
- **Encourage interaction** – I need to get salespeople sharing their experience and marketing people contributing their knowledge directly to sales
- **Structured, uniform and global** – I'm worried that the ad-hoc social networking and web tools that are springing up will just create confusion. Worse, if they aren't maintained they will mislead

Products, Marketing, Sales, Professional Services, Consulting, Delivery and Operations will all have their own ways of producing and storing information – this is what created the silos in the first place. The good news is that these don't have to change. The sales enablement platform spans all these sources, presenting sales materials from all departments as an integrated whole.

As well as giving 360° visibility, the sales enablement platform helps producers by providing:

- **Structure:** defining the types of resource salespeople need; formats; desired content
- **User feedback:** comments from salespeople on how resources can be improved and what new resources are needed
- **User rating:** rating and usage statistics allow producers to judge how well they are doing and allow managers to identify the best producers and the most popular types of resource
- **Inventory control:** to highlight when resources need updating or are approaching end-of-life, and show where more resources are needed

The result is a continuous improvement cycle that leads towards better quality sales resources which are more useful to salespeople.

Sales enablement in context

The selling process can be viewed as a series of conversations between salesperson and customer, so the job of sales enablement is to make those conversations more interesting and ultimately more rewarding for both parties.

When preparing for a sales call, the salesperson needs sales resources that are appropriate to the specific conversation being planned. Successful companies make sure that high quality sales resources exist, and they make it easy for salespeople to find the right resources for the job at hand. The sales enablement platform solves the second of these problems. It gives sellers access to the right sales resources and information – the fuel that powers the engine of sales. Moreover, it helps improve the quality of sales resources by creating channels for feedback and engagement so that content producers get a better understanding of what's needed.

Conclusions

The sales enablement platform is a strategic tool that CMOs can use to define the portfolio structure, drive sales behaviour and optimise product marketing resource. It cuts through organisational silos and allows every department to play its part in supporting sales. It fosters business networking amongst salespeople and with other departments that have a major impact on sales, such as Marketing, Operations and Professional Services. It improves the quality of sales resources by facilitating feedback and engagement between users and producers. For all these activities it provides a structure that is uniform, maintainable and scalable.

For the Sales VP, the sales enablement platform facilitates better execution in the everyday work of the salesforce, leading to lower sales costs and a higher win rate. The result is a solid business case for investment, which explains why the sales enablement platform is taking its place alongside CRM and marketing automation as a must-have business tool.

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