

FEATURE

CLOSE

Pointing to Profits

It takes a special breed of thinker--quick, tenacious--to be a successful salesperson, and the job has been getting harder. As products and services become more complex, salespeople need to think faster than ever, respond more quickly, remember more details, and comply with more guidelines than ever before.

by [Marshall Lager](#)
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That's where guided selling tools come in. Simply put, guided selling is any repeatable process that helps a sale move from prospect to close. Whether it's a Web self-service store and knowledge base, a proposal and quote engine, or scripts and screen-pops for telesales, all are part of the guided selling scene.

Beyond that simple description, however, the idea is much less straightforward. Guided sales tools take many forms and serve many niches, so discussing them requires that a lot of ground be covered. According to Jean Kovacs, CEO and president of guided selling solution provider Comergent, "We see guided selling as four types: turning non-salespeople into salespeople; making salespeople better; enabling customer-driven sales; and all of the above." The important question behind guided selling tools, Kovacs says, is "How far can you take the sales process before you involve an agent?"

Tim Sullivan, vice president of product development at consultancy Sales Performance International (SPI), has a different view. "We call it solution selling. It's a system to help enforce compliance with the company's best sales processes. Solution selling helps the salesperson make the appropriate diagnosis of the customer's needs, and prescribe the right solution."

"Different types of sales agents need different guided selling tools," says Martin Schneider, enterprise software analyst for The 451 Group. "Dedicated outbound salespeople are mostly going to be using scripts, with some intelligent support if the customer bites. With relationship-based, upper-level sales, you need to give a fuller set of tools, including a way for salespeople to determine what product has a higher value in terms of margin." Schneider says that guided selling can also turn out lists of opportunities based on what's already in the database. "You get instant access to the low-hanging fruit of more likely customers."

Schneider also says that guided selling "is part of a life cycle, an evolution, developing in parallel to CRM. In the beginning it was static and scripted, just as contact managers were static and didn't have many functions. The main benefit was that the information was centralized, so all your agents were working from the same materials. Now, with analytics, guided selling is more dynamic, and can be tailored more to situations." And like analytics, according to Schneider, guided selling tools have been gaining traction in both point solution form and as part of an end-to-end CRM suite.



A sample worksheet from sales consultancy Sales Performance International. It targets and tracks what the company refers to as its solution selling system. According to Tim Sullivan, vice president of product development, it helps enforce compliance with a company's best sales processes. Solution selling helps

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Following the Guide

Sales are interactive events, and the best guided selling tools work to enhance the interactions. Bradley Fordham, executive vice president and CTO of Online Insight, says, "The process must be conversational. There are rule-based wizard solutions, but they always feel like wizards--very artificial." The goal, Fordham says, is to support the salesperson, not try to replace her. "You don't want to lose the sense that there's an interaction going on."

"Our solution selling works on one of the better methodologies out there, the pain sheet," Sullivan says. Pain sheets (a cross between diagnostic checklists and flowcharts) are designed to zero in on a customer's root problems. "We use [pain sheets] to clarify what ails the customer, the symptoms, the company size, and their existing capabilities." According to Sullivan, many of SPI's clients do this as Word or PowerPoint templates, "but more and more want to embed it within their automated sales tools or CRM system."

Vendors like Big Machines guide a different part of the sales process. Big Machines lets salespeople provide a fast draft quote, usually during the course of the sales call. The process includes constrained rules, which prevent incompatibilities, and recommendation rules, which provide automatic options to suggest to the customer. It's very much the car dealership style of selling, and in fact most dealers have something like this already. "We are the Web-based, elite front end, helping customers select and price the products and features they need," says Godard Abel, CEO and cofounder.

Sant Suite, from The Sant Corp., takes yet another approach, automating the RFP response process, creating preliminary sales documents in as few as five minutes or less, and developing a sales content repository. According to Lewis Miller, Sant president, the RFPMaster component screens the RFP and digests and breaks out the questions, splitting them among multiple team members for fast action. "Most RFPs have a two-week required response time standard," Miller says. "Sant Suite can get you to the first draft stage in two days, leaving more time to refine and strategize, while your competitors are spending an average of nine days building the first draft."

Sant puts the proposal into a more usable form for the buyer. It creates a live table of contents, so buyers can navigate the document with a click; it also lays out a grid of answers, showing where you do and don't match the requirements as laid out in the RFP.

Do It Yourself

A large part of the guided selling trend is placing the tools into self-service scenarios, according to Schneider. If you've ever bought a computer or other configurable product through an online store, you've probably encountered some guided sales tools. Schneider says: "Configuration management must be integrated into a partner/customer portal for it to provide the most value--this is where self-service shines. Master data management is also a clear adjunct, since an educated customer is easier to sell." Fordham has a similar take: "With self-service, the best bet is to focus on education--give customers the relevant info for what they're interested in."

Guided selling is a critical element of self-service sales, but most experts agree that giving tools to salespeople is a much bigger part of the market. "Salespeople seem to fall into two categories, eagles and journeypeople," Sullivan says. "Eagles are the intuitive, fast moving highfliers, the ones who take to sales easily and shine in the role. Journeypeople are pretty much everybody else--they make a living at sales, but they need coaching to improve."

If you have a process based on eagle behavior, Sullivan explains, then the journeypeople have a map. It's the heart of sticking to best practices. "If we make selling a process, then we can guide people through it, regardless of their expertise."

Guided selling is also a great way to get new staff up to speed, or to get performance from a staffer who isn't motivated. "Sometimes managers have no illusion that salespeople are competent--lots of churn, selling noncore products," Fordham says. "Sometimes you need a track to run on." Abel adds, "When you hire a new sales rep, they can start quoting customers on day one."

Why do salespeople need so much help? "They don't think like buyers--when a salesperson gets a request for a sales document, she finds a best-in-class document, one that has worked before, tweaks it a little bit, then sends it on. But the buyer isn't looking for that," Miller says. "The buyer wants a seller to demonstrate an appreciation of the prospect's need, concrete benefits from implementation, specific solutions to recommend, and evidence of success in similar cases." Miller also notes that decision-makers skim, and do not read, proposals. "The document must be clear, concise, and use acronyms and terms that the decision maker can easily recognize as business-appropriate."

By making your sales processes and documents speak directly to a prospect's needs, guided selling tools make you seem more relevant to the prospect.

Measuring Up

As Schneider states, modern guided selling tools rely on analytics to continually deliver the goods. This is where sales can take a page from marketing's playbook. "Online Insight started as a marketing firm," Fordham says. "We realized that if you can take the focus group approach and move it to the front end, the point of sale, you can greatly improve customer touch in sales." Fordham's marketing experience taught him how to use metrics to see what customers want. Analytics are key in sales and service integrations. It's silly not to collect information on preferences, desires, trends, and segment changes. One of those desires is to not have to tell the company rep the same thing over and over. "One [guided selling] deployment can service multiple channels, including self-service," he says. "This helps you convert across channels, and close the sale without repeating questions."

"Guiding salespeople through the process intuitively supports consistency and compliance," Miller says. He has the numbers to back it up, too--a survey of 200 customers showed a 24 percent improvement in win rate, and a 37 percent climb in conversion rate.

"Reporting is another important part," Abel says. "It tells us what customers are selecting, but also what they're not selecting. This helps us refine the process and make certain that the process is providing the best results." With good metrics and analysis, every sales interaction works for you, even if you don't make the sale.

Sullivan concurs. "One of the nice things about guided selling is that there are lots of metrics to evaluate compliance with the process, see the pipeline, and give accurate forecasts. You'll be able to see the common factors that are early indicators of success, or make changes if you don't see them." Metrics are especially important, he adds, because sales patterns change. "If the process doesn't match customer needs, your guided selling process can work against you. If your process is too automated, it can be hard to change. You must remain flexible."

Click Here for Assistance

As with so many other technologies, the adoption is a large consideration. "By five weeks after training, half a person's knowledge will fade. They're only retaining about 16 percent after 90 days," Sullivan says. "The guided selling process must be reinforced--not only is behavior hard to change, but especially when it's related to how a person earns their living." If you can get full adoption, however, SPI's data show that each individual seller can expect an increase in sales productivity of between 17 and 35 percent.

Razi Imam, CEO of SalesGene, can speak to the adoption problem--it's what his company makes its money trying to solve. "Any company developing software for salespeople must consider how to get them to use new tools. There's no question that use of guided selling will cause performance to improve. Still, if the solution doesn't adhere to their work style and habits, adoption will be very low," Imam says. "This has been the problem behind CRM and SFA adoption, which use the modality of data entry and not that of pursuit. Salespeople like to be communicating and collaborating with their own team and that of the prospect, and they want to be supported when working to close a deal."

The enterprise itself can also be slow on the uptake, Kovacs says. "We encourage enterprises to realize no product is too complex for guided selling. It's also a matter of competitiveness--if you don't move to the Web, use guided selling processes, and the rest, you will fall behind."

Your Order Is Incomplete

The addition of guided selling tools can invigorate a sales process, transforming it from a slog to a meeting of minds. So, what can't guided selling do? "There are lots of interesting places it isn't, but should be," Schneider says. "Now that analytics are part of guided sales it should be in the contact center. It's happening--Epiphany/SSA Global has done some of this--but not enough to have a real effect yet."

"Replicating your best salesperson is the goal, and the dream. We're also certain we'll never get there. The human factor is too important," Fordham says. "Humans can go off the page; guided selling can't put something in the system that isn't already there. Deal making, stuff done by handshake, is what guided selling isn't for." Sullivan says that guided selling is too restrictive or proscriptive for some.

"But it's common sense that there will always be exceptions in sales engagements. We've seen neophyte salespeople get a customer to commit to a sale but keep going through the script, saying, 'Wait, we're not done yet!' You can't substitute for experience." Perhaps Sant's Miller sums it up best: "We get you to the dance 100 percent of the time; the rest is up to you."

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Conair Molds a Better Sales Process

James Lundquist, e-sales manager for plastics industry equipment manufacturer Conair, knows that soft quotes don't measure up to hard plastics.

"Guided selling was almost an accident for us," Lundquist says. "We just wanted something that would put all of our salespeople on the same page." He saw a need and an opportunity to ensure compliance with the best value proposition for the customer and for Conair, and to make sure everybody was on board with sales programs, incentives, and such. "We ran a test once, to see how our salespeople were quoting customers. We tested 15 salespeople, and we got 10 different quotes. The prices varied as much as 50 to 75 percent." Complex and expensive products like extruders and injection molders require a lot of handholding in the sales process, and Conair's sales team didn't know which hand to hold.

The seller of big machines turned to Big Machines for help. "We started with industrial equipment companies like Ingersoll Rand; now we also deal with medical products and high technology. The common theme is that they are all complex products," says Godard Abel, CEO of Big Machines. "How do you generate the best solution for customers? That's where guided selling comes in. Based on the customers' answers, we narrow down the choices to fit their requirements."

Lundquist wanted to make selling easier for his staff, with less time spent bogged down in the more difficult parts of quoting. Looking at this highlighted some deficiencies in Conair's training and processes. "We were using an ERP system, which was great for the back end but not for the front," Lundquist recalls. "Moving to Big Machines made us understand our product better, combining information from sales, engineering, strategy, and more. For example, it changed how we quote spare parts, which are a large percentage of our profits." The system traditionally put spare parts automatically in the quote, based on what customers had selected. By changing the quote to make spare parts an opt-out, Conair was able to make customers feel more in control, which led to an increase in spare part sales. One particular part went from one unit sold last year, to six this year--a big deal with big-ticket items.

It also improved communication among the team. "We became better able to manage hit and close rates--we knew what was going on, and could see our successes through the reporting engine," Lundquist says. Big Machines, a Salesforce.com partner, is committed to making sales something that any client can excel at. "We also use our solution ourselves," Abel says. "Partnering with Salesforce.com has exposed us to a much bigger market." Lundquist knows his sales process is in good hands with Big Machines. "Big Machines has given me confidence in knowing they will work with any other provider to improve our sales system." --M.L.

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