Sales Playbooks Help Shorten the Sales Cycle
By Mary Sullivan

When sales reps deliver the right pitch at the right time, they keep deals on track and shorten the time to closure. But what are the best practices for closing a deal in your company? One of the easiest ways to keep sales moving is to give your reps the information they will need at each stage of the sales cycle. A good Sales Playbook offers, in easily accessible form, guidelines on the right conversations and tools to use throughout the sales process.

The benefits usually attributed to use of sales playbooks demonstrate their value at shortening the sales cycle:

> *Getting new reps up-to-speed quickly* – Business is picking up and you're hiring again? You've merged with another company? You'll need a way to share what has been successful for your reps with new ones coming on board. The Sales Playbook is a great adjunct to sales training and gives reps a reference to use after training is over.
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> *Helping channel sales reps position your products* – You may or may not be involved in training of partners' sales people, but your Sales Playbook helps them quickly grasp the benefits of your product and how best to position it within their own product portfolios.
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> *Launching new products and solutions* – One of the best ways to be sure your sales team knows how to position your new products is to give them easy reference materials that explain the positioning and the business benefits of the new product to their customers. Assure that the sales team uses your messages consistently.

The reason Sales Playbooks work is, they remove the hurdles that can slow down the sale process.

Guidelines for Effective Sales Playbooks

★ Provide the Sales Playbook **digitally on your intranet (and channel extranet)** with abundant use of hyperlinks so your sales team can easily reference the content, and so you can provide information updates on an as-needed basis. No more print playbooks in binders!

★ Make sure the Sales Playbook is **written from Sales' point of view**. It should be customer-oriented, not product-oriented. Include sales management and a few successful sales reps in the initial content development, and pilot the playbook with additional reps to make sure it is easy to understand.

- ★ Realize that sales people will often research information immediately prior to a sales call, so **information must be easy to find and read**. Use bullet points, section headers, and a table of contents.
- ★ **Associate information with stages of the sales cycle**. There are different "plays" at each stage of the sale. Help reps with initial discovery and qualifying questions at first. Later they will need to know how to handle objections. Cover all the fronts.
- ★ Build into your Sales Playbook **a direct and easy way for reps to provide feedback** and updates based on their latest experiences, whether competitive information or new understanding of target buyers.

Specialized Playbooks
There are multiple approaches to delivering sales-playbook content. Among them, consider specialized playbooks for:

- *Vertical markets* – Business sectors each have their own special business concerns, and purchasing decisions may be made by different functions in the organization. Tailor selling strategies to specific markets if you expect your sales teams to focus on verticals.
- *Geographic regions*, especially globally – Economies in different regions and countries present different buying environments, and cultural differences call for customization of the sales approach.
- *Products or product families* – New products may be directed at buyers who aren't the usual contacts for sales reps, and new products may well offer new business benefits to existing contacts.
- *Services*, if you offer a service component with your solutions – The decision-maker for the purchase of services may be different from the product purchaser, so make sure reps who sell both know how to approach both.
- *Channel partners* – Customize your playbook content, understanding that channel reps sell other products besides yours. Put it on a portal where channel reps have access, and be sure they know how, *and why*, they can login to it.

What Should a Sales Playbook Include
In general, every sales playbook should include company and product information, but keep it short and sweet. Product information should clearly and simply explain the uses and benefits of a product. Technical information does not belong here; provide reference links to data sheets for that.

But also include these details, which are of primary importance to Sales:

- The profile of the ideal customer (see how to identify a persona) and what concerns them most
- Qualifying questions to ask early in the sales process
- Positioning relative to competitors and alternatives buyers may consider
- The value to customers of your solution, from their perspective
- How to handle likely objections
- Which sales tools to use at each stage of the selling cycle, and links to where reps can access them – when to use a demo or an ROI tool, for example

For more information on Sales Playbooks see KickStart blog post How Polycom and VMWare are Implementing Sales Playbooks.

About the Author

Mary Sullivan is a co-founder of KickStart Alliance and has held sales, marketing and product management positions through her more than 20 years in tech. For more help developing sales tools, including Sales Playbooks, please contact Mary.

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