



## *Sales: Art or Science?*

*A summary of the September Sales Operations Forum*

**Driving sales success with a standard sales methodology was the topic of Silicon Valley's first Sales Operations Forum. Thirty Sales and Sales Operations executives met September 21, 2005 at a meeting hosted by Aspect Communications and KickStart Alliance to network, learn best-practices and share ideas.**

After networking over coffee, the first Sales Operations Forum kicked off with a panel discussion titled "Sales: Art or Science?". Price Burlington, Senior Director of Worldwide Sales Operations at Aspect Communications (now Aspect Software) led the panel comprised of Bill Macy, Business Objects' Director of Sales Enablement; Dan Ahrens, Sales Expert with CustomerCentric Systems; and Nate Bride, Manager Sales Operations at Salesforce.com. Price opened the panel discussion with an introduction of the panelists' extensive experience implementing sales methodologies.

### **Definition of "Sales Methodology"**

To ensure the Forum audience had a common starting point and terminology, Price requested the audience define the terms "sales methodology" and "sales process". Attendees discussed the difference between the terms, defining sales process as the typical actions required to move a buyer from prospect to customer. They defined sales methodology as a company's sales strategy, their common language for account planning and strategy, and method for capturing how a company's customers like to buy.

### **Desired results: Justification for investing in a sales methodology**

Market changes are lengthening sales cycles and most high-tech companies face tougher competition, broadened account politics and intense scrutiny of IT projects. Bill, Dan, and Nate each talked about the need for a "value-based" or "solution selling" methodology to help sales teams navigate increasingly complex sales situations. Dan further defined the need for a "conversation-based" methodology to drive down-stream sales

conversations. The panelists listed the long-term advantages of using consistent sales methodologies and processes as: the capture of best sales practices, the use of consistent positioning and effective sales messaging, alignment of sales and marketing, consistent measures of sales rep performance and account progress and ease of integration of sales teams in the event of an acquisition.

The bottom line? The panelists believe that using an effective sales methodology can help companies drive revenue performance, reduce the cost-to-revenue ratio, and increase the number of sales reps making their numbers.

### **Training is a long-term process**

The panel advised the audience to consider training as a "process" rather than as "an event". Each panel member named practical methods they used to develop and deliver successful training. If you deliver training first in a country that requires translation (like Japan), Nate explained, you will ensure your content is concise, because translation reveals extraneous content. Other practical training considerations include:

- Integrate the study of real prospects and case studies to make training more relevant
- Train sales management first, but not too far ahead of rank and file sales teams
- Train both marketing and sales teams to ensure the two organizations speak the same language
- Anticipate resistance, plan for experienced sales reps to approach training with hesitation
- Train presales—this organization can offer powerful reinforcement or significantly undermine your results

## **Avoid resistance from your sales team**

Positioning your methodology training as instructing sales team “how to communicate your company’s unique value to customers and how typical prospects like to buy” rather than on “how to sell”, you will avoid much of the sales team’s resistance, Bill says. Dan added that if your sales team perceives that the purpose of the training is to gain control, you will experience greater resistance to the effort. Bill warned companies to monitor how sales teams are interpreting new sales messages and methodologies carefully. For example, an emphasis on selling “beyond IT” can easily be perceived as “only sell to line-of-business managers”, with disastrous results.

## **Utilize change management strategies**

Implementing a new sales methodology is a strategic endeavor and organizations must use change management strategies to drive change throughout the entire organization, Bill explained. He stated that although clear ownership is critical, driving change must expand past the sales organization; training and adoption must extend to all organizations involved in the sales process. Executive and senior sales management’s buy-in is critical to your process. He warned the audience that it is easy for your sales executives to undermine your efforts at the end of the quarter when a “close at all cost” mentality might win out over process and methodology.

Just as customer success stories are critical to your sales process, sales success stories are critical to your *internal* sales process. Use real internal success stories to share best practices and model behavior. Focusing on one or two early wins, and widely communicating their success, is a clear strategy for driving change. Since they often develop both internal and external sales messaging, directors of marketing are critical to your adoption process, Nate noted. Their clear understanding of your sales methodology and sales messaging strategy is critical to ensure alignment. Marketing can easily undermine your adoption inadvertently.

## **Infrastructure and technology support the process**

Dan explained that a command and control structure is not enough to drive a sales methodology through an organization. He went on to discuss three critical elements of a sales methodology implementation plan

including:

- An infrastructure for tracking and measuring success
- Sharing best practices.
- Alignment with critical technologies like SFA

## **What role does Sales Operations play?**

This question resulted in a broad set of answers, however it was clear that the panelists were driving their organizations to become “trusted advisors” to the sales organization. Although to some extent Sales Operations will always be the methodology “police” and implementing a sales methodology needs a clear owner, the panelists pointed out the sales directors must—in the end—own methodology adoption. Dan stressed that Sales Operations ensure the organization delivers sales-ready messaging, which ensures the sales organization has the right messaging at the right time. Bill and Nate were clear advocates of Sales Operations organizations as drivers of change—advertising, and publishing successes, selling internally and managing sales management’s involvement in the process.

## **About the Sales Operations Forum**

If you are interested in attending a future Sales Operations Forum meeting and have not registered for our mailing list, please contact Alison Chandless (alisonc@kickstartall.com). The Sales Operations Forum is exclusively for senior Sales and Sales Operations management. Each meeting’s agenda will include a discussion of relevant sales operations issues and solutions, as well a presentation by an industry expert. There will also be time for networking and informal discussion.

Alison Chandless has over 15 years of sales and marketing experience with enterprise and start-up technology companies including Hyperion, Network Appliance, Vantive (acquired by PeopleSoft), PGP, SGI, and IBM. Alison and her team create sales readiness tools, training, and programs that expedite the sales process and improve the efficiency of sales organizations. KickStart Alliance is a team of sales and marketing executives who help technology clients strategize and implement key revenue and market-share initiatives. Working with technology clients ranging from start-ups to Fortune 500 companies, KickStart consultants provide Positioning, Lead Generation, and Sales Readiness services.