The Truth About Sales Performance Metrics

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Introduction – Why This, Why Now?

Imagine for a moment that you are the plant manager for a factory that assembles automobiles. You're standing at the end of your assembly line counting cars as they are completed when you realize the factory isn't achieving its production objectives.

Do you:

A. Yell back into the plant, "I need more cars people, get me more cars!"?

B. Tell leadership you still think you will hit the target and hope things improve?

C. Analyze the factory's performance against predictive, leading indicators to identify the root cause of the production gap?

D. All of the above?

Ridiculous, right? In reality, this scenario would likely never happen in manufacturing. No plant manager finds out that production targets will be missed AFTER it happens. If you are managing a production facility of any kind, you are continually evaluating performance against leading indicators so that if a gap does occur, there is enough time to resolve it before it impacts output. And, if by some error or omission, production numbers were being missed, no plant manager would be foolish enough to think telling people to produce more would magically make that happen. Finally, no manager who wants to keep their position relies on hope to magically turn things around.

In fact, the hyperbolic scenario described in the factory above actually gets repeated in countless sales organizations worldwide every single day, despite the massive amount of money companies invest in the sales function. For instance, since the early 2000s, textbooks and research articles have highlighted the disparity between firms' investments in personal selling activities and advertising activities. As early as 2003, marketing gurus Kotler and Armstrong noted that firms spent nearly three times more on selling than advertising[1]. In a widely cited article on advertising and personal selling returns in 2016, Lee, Sridhar, and Palmatier noted that firms were annually spending $140 billion on advertising and $800 billion on personal selling[2]. Recent forecasting by firms shows no signs of reversal of these trends, yet sales performance lags well behind digital marketing, manufacturing, finance, IT, and other disciplines in leveraging metrics to optimize performance.

As highlighted in three recent research journal articles[3], the unfortunate truth about sales performance metrics is that sales organizations typically focus most of their energy on the wrong metrics and generally use the metrics they are tracking in the wrong way. This results in a variety of associated dysfunctional selling behaviors that lead to missed objectives, decreased margins, and customer and sales team churn. However, as evidenced in these research articles and discussions in the popular press, the very ubiquity of the problem also creates an unmatched opportunity.

Researchers surveyed over 700 business executives nearly a decade ago and found that over half of their organizations had no formal processes for measuring new business opportunities[4]. Despite subsequent technological advances, sales organizations have been painfully slow in adapting to the new paradigm. As a result, sales organizations that measure the right things and use metrics in the appropriate way have an enormous opportunity to improve sales effectiveness and develop a sustainable competitive advantage. As the pivot point for sales performance improvement, it is incumbent on sales enablement to help the organization determine which metrics it should and should not be tracking and precisely how this information can be used to help leaders identify opportunities for improvement.

This leads us to the purpose of this paper. Our aim is to go beyond providing a list of metrics we think you should use to measure sales performance. Instead, we hope to achieve three objectives:

1. Provide a framework for defining and using metrics to help drive sales excellence.

2. Help you to evaluate your current use of sales performance metrics objectively.

3. Inspire you to boldly lead your own organization down the path of using the right metrics in the best possible way.

To achieve these objectives, we will cover the following topics:

- How the problem with most sales performance metrics today comes down to inaccurate numbers and inappropriate use.
- How the **Sales Success Formula** is a mathematical model for defining sales metrics.
- The performance pyramid as a framework for understanding how results are produced.
- How to use sales performance metrics properly.
- How to masterfully create change in your organization.

We expect you will find some of the ideas presented here to be a bit challenging, perhaps even disconcerting. But rest assured, once you objectively examine the current state of sales performance metrics, you, too, will see the obvious and overwhelming opportunities for improvement.

Drucker says what…? Using the Wrong Metrics

A little research on the phrase, “You can’t manage what you can’t measure,” will likely uncover a mountain of controversy about what, where, when, how, and why to use metrics to improve business performance. Whether it was said by Peter Drucker, Edwards Deming, neither, or both, the fact remains that performance measurement is an indelible and controversial part of managing the sales function. In fact, sales success can be expressed in the form of a simple mathematical formula (we will refer to this throughout the discussion as the **Sales Success Formula**):

ACTIVITY x PROFICIENCY = SALES

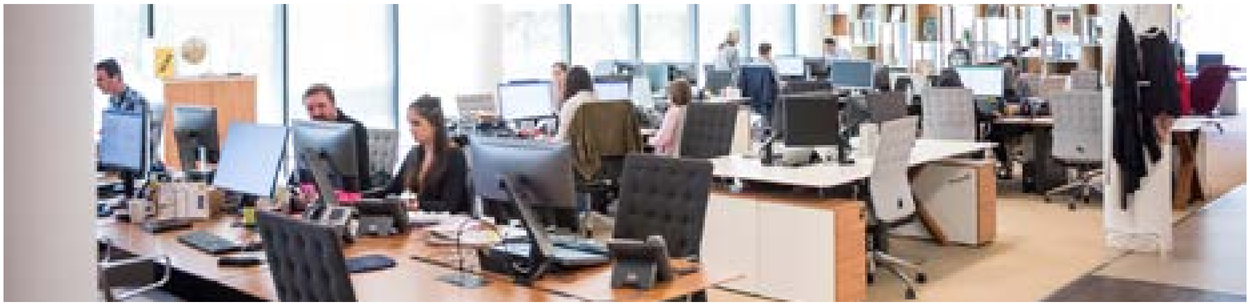
In this formula, sales results on the right side of the equation represent lagging indicators that can be expressed in a variety of ways, from new customers to total revenue and gross profit dollars. Meanwhile, the metrics on left side of the equation are leading indicators that we will refer to as the predictive metrics. Going back to our factory analogy, we can think of activity as the raw materials we are bringing into our sales factory, while proficiency metrics are the sales equivalent to operating efficiency in the factory. This means that for any sales target or sales cycle timeframe, it is possible to work backward mathematically to determine what activity is required and what proficiency must be achieved to reach that target.

In fact, every sales performance gap MUST be preceded by a gap in one or more of the predictive metrics shown above. This is a mathematical certainty. However, when we meet with sales organizations and examine their reporting, we inevitably find that the majority of their reporting is focused on different ways to slice and dice the right side of this equation, with relatively little being measured in predictive metrics. Our findings in these interactions match the research findings in studies referenced earlier. One team of researchers expressed surprise as their study found that the forecasting methods currently used by organizations seemed to directly contradict what sales professionals had claimed to be most important[5].

Sales organizations have sales results by product, customer segment, market, time of day, day of week, weather pattern, and phase of the moon. (Full disclosure – we’ve never actually seen phase-of-moon correlations. But if you are using this, we’d love to hear from you). Yet, they have no clue what percentage of identified opportunities get proposed, an accurate view of what percentage gets closed, the average value of sales they win versus what they propose, or the average sales cycle time. This focus on the most lagging indicator, sales results, means that even if they see a performance gap and immediately take corrective action, they will likely fail for at least one more sales cycle. And even these lagging indicators often fail to provide critical insights. For example, when the only measures that matter are getting an order or closing a deal, we often find lower customer satisfaction and higher churn as salespeople sacrifice the customer experience for the sake of a deal.

Meanwhile, the "predictive metrics" some organizations use are terribly poor substitutes for the real thing. Perhaps the most glaring example of this, and a measure we have previously referred to as "The Worst Metric in Sales," is total pipeline value. Setting a target for and measuring total value of the pipeline (often referred to as funnel standards) is one of the most commonly used metrics in all of selling.

The rationale for this approach seems sound – "we think we will win approximately 25% of the opportunities we propose. Therefore, we will need to maintain 4X our objective in the pipeline at all times." Unfortunately, prospects who aren't going to buy from you generally don't tell the sales rep calling on them. So those opportunities aren't marked as closed or lost and removed from the funnel. In fact, since many salespeople don't like to prospect, they often cling to opportunities well after they are really expired, simply to remain in compliance with the funnel standards. You can see the problem; over time, the quality of the pipeline erodes to the point where 4X is no longer sufficient to achieve the sales objective. So, the target is increased to 5X the sales objective. Soon after that, it is increased to 6X, and so on, until sales leadership is changed and the process begins again.



The issue here isn't the concept. It's the execution. Research has shown that despite all the efforts put toward forecasting, sales professionals still struggle with the application[6]. For this math to work, we must measure flow through the pipeline, not accumulation in it. In fact, if we never close any sales and add anything to the pipeline, it will grow. This means the aggregate amount in the pipeline could, in some cases, be inversely related to sales success – thus making it the wrong metric. Many organizations address this by applying a variety of rules such as aging discounts to the opportunities in the pipeline. Frankly, this is misplaced energy that results in more dysfunction as salespeople try to negotiate with sales managers to preserve enough opportunities to meet any defined funnel standards. In some cases, they will debate the quality of an opportunity that is already lost – a complete waste of time and energy. As we will see in the recommendations below, the problem can actually be solved quite easily, though full disclosure; a little math will be required.

Another challenge with these targets lies in how they are created. Most sales organizations still use a top-down approach to setting sales objectives. Management assigns quotas, and achieving quota becomes the goal for the seller and the manager. Each quarter, month, or week, the question being asked is, "Where are you relative to your quota?" While sales organizations have been setting quotas for decades, it actually has the potential to reduce sales performance. Think about a typical salesperson's first thought when given their annual quota (generally above whatever they sold during the prior year). All together now, "that's too high!" Of course, that's what they think. Everyone wants to achieve their objective, and it's so much easier if the objective is lower. Meanwhile, give salespeople a comp plan and ask them how much money they want to make, and they almost always set an income objective that would require them to sell well above the quota! So, the top-down approach results in more resistance and lower targets than what we would likely achieve with a bottom-up approach. So why do so many organizations still do it this way? Old habits die hard. And as researchers have shown, the "predictive tools of the past are not enough to navigate the future[7]."

The final challenge we will highlight with current sales performance metrics is that two critical categories of metrics, behavioral and developmental, are missing or ignored altogether[8]. As we've noted, every sales organization measures output, or the right side of the equation above. Unfortunately, that's all some companies measure. Meanwhile, better organizations are setting targets and measuring performance for the predictive metrics on the left side of the equation. Even if they aren't using mathematically valid targets or measuring aggregates versus flow, at least they are on the correct side of the equation. However, almost no one is measuring the effectiveness with which salespeople execute the behaviors that produce these results[9].

Please don't misunderstand; we aren't suggesting that they don't measure activities such as call volume. They measure WHAT people do, but they don't measure HOW effectively they do it. Most organizations simply don't measure execution effectiveness or the things that contribute to better customer engagement. As we will see below, the predictive metrics don't just happen; they are a result of the selling behaviors executed by the team. Taking this a step further, even fewer organizations have targets for or to measure the skill and knowledge development of the people on the team. Again, they may track what training programs the salespeople attend, but they rarely measure what skill was developed, what knowledge was acquired, or the degree to which either is being applied in the field. And when results are missed, ***sales leaders send the same people into the same environment, equipped with the same skill and knowledge, while expecting a different result.*** Naturally, frustration ensues for everyone involved.

If a Carrot Doesn't Work … Using Metrics Badly

While using the wrong metrics presents a significant challenge, this problem is compounded by how many sales organizations use the metrics they track. It is here we find three problems that consistently undermine the value of sales performance metrics in the organization.

First, many sales teams invest considerable energy in looking at reports without the proper context. Without context, most metrics provide little value and can even be a counterproductive distraction. For example, let's suppose we told you that organizations A and B offer competing solutions in the same markets. Their sales teams compete directly against one another every day. However, revenue at Organization A is three times the revenue at Organization B. What can you conclude about the sales effectiveness of the two organizations?

If your answer is nothing, you are exactly correct. Without more context, such as how many people are selling, what the sales expense is at the two organizations, how revenue has changed over time, what percentage of their revenue is from new versus existing customers, and a variety of other information, total revenue offers little to no insight about sales effectiveness. Context matters, which means all metrics should be viewed in the context of at least two other variables – time and target. We can only determine if performance is trending in the right direction by comparing how sales performance metrics are changing over time. Similarly, only when we evaluate actual performance against properly established targets can we identify and explore performance gaps and takes steps that will ultimately impact results.

If this seems like common sense that even the most simple-minded teams would apply, consider this. How many reports exist in your CRM right now that are not showing how actual values compare to targets or how they are changing over time? If your organization is like most, a high percentage of your CRM reports lack this context. Creating a report that provides data is easy, but setting thoughtful, relevant targets is not. Similarly, creating reports showing how data changes over time requires more effort and, therefore, is skipped.

Another challenge with how metrics are being used is that many organizations lack alignment around what needs to be measured to run the business and what needs to be provided to senior leaders and investors to demonstrate how the business is performing. When senior leaders or boards ask for specific information, the rest of the organization takes note and produces the information. Unfortunately, the information being provided is often of no use to the people who actually run the sales organization. And worse, it may take considerable effort to produce the requested data. Meanwhile, the team must still spend energy producing the information they need to run the business effectively. Despite the prevalence of robust CRM systems, salespeople are still wary of their ultimate utility[10]. As a general principle, data reporting should add as little extra work for the sales team as possible. This rule is almost certainly violated when there is a lack of alignment between what the sales team must measure to run the business and what senior leaders and boards want to be confident in how the business is being run[11].

So, why the disconnect? Why doesn't everyone agree on what information will be used and how it will be used, so there is no need for separate metrics? Often, it's because senior sales leaders cannot demonstrate clearly how the metrics they are using will provide all the information needed by their team and the company board and C-Suite. Think back to our earlier comments about the fallacy of the total pipeline value. If senior sales leaders are using that metric to demonstrate performance and predict future results to the board, there is a high probability the correlation between total pipeline value and sales performance will break, reducing their credibility over time. So, if the board knows what they want, many well-intentioned and otherwise highly successful sales leaders will simply give them what they ask for, with little thought to the overall impact doing so will have on the team.

Last but certainly not least … this is arguably the most egregious error we see in how metrics are used. When managers or organizations use metrics as a stick to beat the sales team, there is a very high probability all manner of dysfunction will result. Perhaps the most common example of this is a quota and committing to meetings. In this scenario, managers hold regular meetings, often weekly but sometimes bi-weekly or monthly, during which they go around the room and ask each salesperson what they are going to deliver for the month or quarter (if this sounds at all familiar, you may want to steady yourself a bit before reading on). The exercise itself is problematic because it is intended to embarrass salespeople falling behind their objectives.

We will talk about how this approach impacts those who are struggling in a moment. But first, let's talk about those good people in the room who are actually achieving their objectives. For these people, the exercise is a complete waste of time. If they have ever struggled or have any empathy for those who are, they will be wildly uncomfortable for each person who is missing their goal. Good people do not want to watch other good people get embarrassed in public. So, for our performing salespeople, this is an uncomfortable waste of time. But one might argue that it is worth it if it motivates our underperforming sales reps to step up their game and make their numbers. Possibly … except that isn't what happens. Most people who enter the sales profession do so because they like competing and controlling their income -they are highly motivated to succeed[12]. And when they are struggling, it isn't generally because they aren't putting forth the effort. It's because they need help. They need help developing their skill and knowledge, and they need coaching to help them execute more effectively or focus on the right opportunities. What they generally don't need is an embarrassment.

If performing reps dislike these meetings, struggling sellers absolutely despise them. And what change does this public display produce? More sales? Better focus? More effort? No, more often than not, this activity produces lies! Yep, the most common approach for salespeople to take if they are beaten when they predict they will miss their objective and then again when they actually do miss the objective is to limit the beatings and predict success until they fail – they lie. While we may think that's unacceptable, and lying should never be tolerated, the reality in many organizations is that it is tolerated and encouraged. On more than a few occasions, we have heard sales managers tell underperforming reps that "forecasting failure isn't acceptable." Obviously, perpetuating lies is horribly bad for the organization. And if we want to discourage this behavior and encourage the transparency needed to get an accurate picture of where we are and properly diagnose gaps, we must never hit people with a stick when we identify gaps in the metrics. If we do this once, it creates problems. If we do it systemically, it creates organizational habits that make it nearly impossible to use metrics properly.

Moreover, expecting reps to intelligently forecast their results, which we think of as a ***qualitative*** approach, is an unreasonable request. A ***quantitative*** model is required. For example, if the typical sales cycle in a company is thirty days, expecting sellers to forecast what they will sell in sixty days makes little sense since they haven't even met the people they will sell to yet. The further into the future we want the forecast to predict, the less likely it is to be accurate. To further illustrate this challenge, a recent discussion on the accuracy of weather forecasts noted that "data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration suggests a seven-day forecast can accurately predict the weather about 80 percent of the time, and a five-day forecast can accurately predict the weather approximately 90 percent of the time. However, beyond 10 days, a forecast is only right about half the time[13]." Even using advanced models, forecasting the future is challenging. We needn't compound the challenge by encouraging inaccurate forecasts.

The Shape of Things to Come … The Performance Pyramid

To fully appreciate the role proper metrics can play in achieving sales excellence, it's essential first to understand how sales results are produced. We drew an analogy earlier between sales and an auto factory and discussed how common manufacturing metrics such as raw materials inflow and operating efficiency have analogs in sales in activity and proficiency metrics. We will provide more detail on this momentarily. But first, let's talk about another important analog to selling – athletics. You see, selling is a performance profession, very much like professional sports. And in some ways, it is very different from other functions inside the business.

Consider accounting and finance, for example. While the work can be draining and require tremendous skill and knowledge, your finance team doesn't compete head-to-head with the finance teams at each of your top competitors every time they produce a report. They receive a request, gather their inputs, accurately complete the report, and submit it. Assuming there aren't any errors, and it's completed on time, they succeed 100% of the time. This isn't true for salespeople. They identify an opportunity before qualifying the opportunity, and presenting a recommendation. Even if that recommendation is submitted in a timely fashion and error-free, they will only win on average 20–25% of the time! That's because there are three to four other salespeople doing the same thing, but only one will win the business. Day in and day out, your salespeople compete against other salespeople and win and lose in head-to-head competition. In this regard, selling is more like professional sports than accounting or engineering, and the performance management science applied in sports directly applies to sales effectiveness.

To help illustrate the implications this has for sales performance metrics, we will use a simple diagram (No, not the Conjoined Triangles of Success, though that's cool too!), the Performance Pyramid shown in Figure 1.

At the top of the pyramid are the sales results we want to produce. As discussed earlier, this includes all the metrics in our **Sales Success Formula** on both the right side (lagging indicators) and left side (leading indicators) of the equation. Going back to our sports analogy by using a baseball pitcher, wins might be the desired outcome on the right side of the equation, while ERA, balls, strikes, walks, and hits given up might be predictive metrics on the left side of the equation. Similarly for a sales rep, wins, revenue, and gross margin might be metrics on the right side of our equation, while opportunities, proposals, and closing ratio would be on the left side.

Figure 1

In both cases, it would be the player's behavior that produces results. Make no mistake that environmental factors can impact wins for both a professional pitcher and sales professional. A lack of run support can make it more difficult to win games, just like having a price disadvantage can make it harder to win sales. However, the environment is outside the span of control for the player, while their behavior is within their span of control. While it is important for the team leaders to identify environmental obstacles for the pitcher and the seller, it is better for the player to focus on what they can do to maximize their success given the environment in which they work. So, given the environment, it's the selling behavior that produces the results – it's how effectively people prospect, qualify, present, handle objections, manage opportunities, etc., that has the greatest impact on their success. In fact, academic research has shown that "intrinsic motivation improves both prospecting and conversion efficacy."[14]

What enables one person to execute these selling behaviors better than another? Naturally, it's the skill and knowledge they possess that enables their selling behaviors. Being more proficient at identifying business issues, more effective at developing differentiating criteria, and more knowledgeable about the impact of their solutions enables them to execute selling behaviors better. In other words, all the skill and knowledge the first seller has that the second does not, will help the first seller to outperform the second.

Much like athletes, salespeople acquire skill and knowledge from two essential foundational elements: their capacity or innate talents and their commitment or motivation. Capacity and commitment are the ultimate foundation on which success is built. An important note is that although these factors can lead to success, they don't guarantee it. In addition, it should be noted that although external motivation can be impacted by a variety of factors, a person's life circumstances, company policies, market conditions, interaction with colleagues and managers, their intrinsic motivation, and their capacity cannot. Therefore, it is imperative that companies hire salespeople who possess the appropriate intrinsic motivation and capacity for the job. To put it in sporting terms, if I am 5 feet, 6 inches tall and have a vertical leap of 6 inches, it doesn't matter how motivated I am or what my basketball skill and knowledge may be. I won't be the starting center for an NBA team. As the famous quote attributed to former Utah Jazz coach Frank Layden posits, "You can't teach height."[15] Similarly, salespeople who lack basic technical aptitude and empathy likely won't do well in highly technical, relationship-based selling environments.

The performance pyramid then illustrates the non-environmental factors contributing to a sales professional's success. In other words, my capacity and commitment provide the foundation for developing my skill and knowledge, enabling me to execute selling behaviors, create a certain quantity of new opportunities and convert them into customers and revenue, and represent the ultimate outcome. The implication of the Performance Pyramid on sales performance metrics is significant:

If we want to understand, let alone improve sales performance, we need to track metrics across the entire performance pyramid.

This is something very few companies do consistently, so let's now review what sales organizations should be measuring and how these metrics should be used. We will provide an overview of key metrics for each area of the pyramid in the next section, followed by a table summarizing a set of sample metrics we advise high-performing sales organizations to use regularly.

They won't produce themselves ... Measuring Sales Results

Measuring leading indicators does not replace measuring outcomes, but it does help explain how they were produced and affords us the opportunity to impact them. As mentioned earlier, the results level of our pyramid represents measures across the entire **Sales Success Formula**, including both lagging and leading indicators. When considering which lagging indicators to measure, it is important that the sales organization be clear about how success is defined and measure performance accordingly[16]. For example, in many SaaS companies, the cost to acquire a customer can be even higher than the initial revenue that customer provides to the business. This means maintaining that customer over time, renewing the relationship monthly or annually, is essential for the sale to be profitable. In this context, measuring sales performance based entirely on whether or not the salesperson wins an order would be a mistake. Customers who cancel or don't renew are worse financially for the business than not having the customer at all. In these environments, sales metrics on the right side of our equation should include customer satisfaction, customer churn, or renewal rates.

Meanwhile, some situations call for salespeople to discount the sale price to secure an order. In these environments, margins can be eroded quickly by salespeople who fail to demonstrate value, negotiate poorly, or even lead interactions by promising discounts. While they may win customers, their gross profit margins will likely suffer. This makes them less profitable resources than colleagues who win customers without the same level of discounting. In these cases, measures like discount percentage or gross profit margin are key variables to consider in evaluating sales effectiveness.

Finally, a growing body of evidence suggests that forecast accuracy is becoming increasingly important. As Hoyle, Dingus, and Wilson note in their work on manager and salesperson perspectives on sales forecasting, “The compensation of sales managers and sales representatives are tied at least loosely to the accuracy of forecasts.”[17] The reason for this is clear: forecast accuracy creates better resource planning, promotes more transparent communications, and allows for intelligent coaching interventions. Accuracy or predictability is an indicator of a process or function that is being effectively managed – even when the forecast shows targets will be missed.

Moving to the left side of our **Sales Success Formula**, we will want to track mathematically valid activity and proficiency metrics. Beginning first with the activity metrics, effective sales organizations will want to track new opportunities and new proposals for a given period. In organizations where the salespeople are responsible for generating most or all of their opportunities, the company may even want to track metrics like number of calls made. Please note that while the company may also track the total size of the funnel for various stages, it is imperative that this not be the focus, as opportunity flow is what produces sales results, not opportunity stagnation. By focusing measurement on new opportunities and new proposals, companies get a more accurate picture of performance, forecast more accurately, and avoid wasting time debating whether a given opportunity should remain open or closed.

The proficiency metrics include measures such as proposal ratio (the percentage of new opportunities that reach the proposal stage), closing ratio (the percentage of proposals that are won), and average sale value. In addition, it can be useful for sales organizations to track sales cycle time (the time from first sales contact to sale close), though this metric should only rarely be the target for coaching interventions, as over-emphasis can cause poor funnel management behaviors such as only entering opportunities salespeople know they will win. Figure 2 visually represents these metrics using a common sales funnel model. Remember that many CRM systems will not have reports already designed that accurately track these metrics. However, the math is simple, and, in general, your CRM administrator can create what is needed.

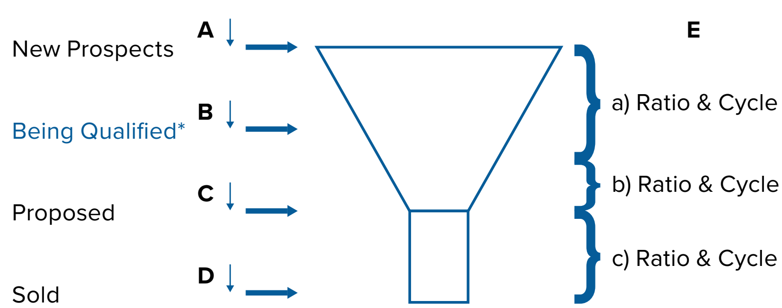
A. NEW Prospects

B. NEW Opportunities being qualified

C. NEW Proposals

D. Average Sales Value

E. Ratios & cycle times for each of the following:
- **a. New Prospect to Being Qualified**
- **b. Being Qualified to Proposed**
- **c. Proposed to Sold**



** Often misunderstood to be “Been Qualified”*

Figure 2

A final note on the **Sales Success Formula** metrics. Each salesperson in the organization should have their own personal sales success plan based on their individual goals and personal historical metrics. When we create the generic funnel standards mentioned earlier, we will invariably find people with fewer opportunities than the standard achieving sales objectives (because they have a better than average closing ratio or average sale value) and people who exceed the standard who are missing targets (because they have a lower closing ratio and average sale value). By starting with the seller's desired income, managers can work backward to determine the sales volume of new opportunities per week or month, new proposals, closing ratio, and average sale (or gross margin, depending on the comp plan) needed for each person to achieve their personal sales and income target. This approach to goal setting creates better alignment and more committed sellers whose personal objectives are nearly always higher than any quota the company would have assigned them. For more information on this goal-setting conversation, you can download our Guide to Sales Coaching here. You can also find a sample sales success plan worksheet here.

We are what we repeatedly do[18] ... Measuring Selling Behavior

While there are likely some gaps in how the typical sales organization measures results, there are probably gaping holes in how they collect and employ metrics across the other elements of the performance pyramid. When discussing how effectively a seller or team performs, the answer will be based entirely on the sales results being produced, with little conversation about the effectiveness of the selling behaviors. However, when professional athletes are evaluated, their results are certainly part of the discussion, but in nearly all cases, their execution of key behaviors for their position is also evaluated, even scored, and reviewed. Why is selling, which is also very much a performance profession, so different?

No Shared Behavior Model

One reason this is often skipped when discussing sales effectiveness is that the company has not established a common selling methodology that the entire team agrees represents the best way to engage customers, manage opportunities, or develop and execute account plans. Evaluating behavior without a shared model would be the sales equivalent of evaluating professional football players without a playbook. Absent a shared model, there is no agreement on what "good" selling behaviors look like. If the results are positive, the behavior is considered good. And if not, it is considered deficient. This would never be accepted in other performance professions, and we shouldn't accept it in sales either. As is the case with athletics, there will always be nuance and individuality in how individual salespeople execute key selling behaviors. But there should be some fundamental alignment around the approach and key objectives.

For example, many organizations now recognize that their people aren't really competing for customer orders. They are competing for customer trust[19]. Moreover, there are certain conversations that should take place for them to maximize their ability to develop more trusting relationships. Modeling these conversations with clear competency scores and then rating seller proficiency can identify opportunities for improvement that will ultimately impact sales results. Absent this, each seller is left to figure out on their own what the optimal selling behavior is. In addition, managers and sellers who aren't aligned on the ideal selling model may spend considerable time debating the merits of their respective approaches rather than improving execution in the proven models. Our recommendation is a simple five-point scoring model for the most important selling behaviors in the model. This provides enough granularity to be meaningful without so large a scale as to be cumbersome.

No Artifacts for Effective Execution

Even when a common selling methodology does exist, measuring behavior against the model can be limited when there are no clear artifacts for effective execution. For example, managers generally cannot participate in every call in more complex selling environments, and the company certainly can't record and analyze every sales conversation. So how is effective execution evaluated? When and if there are artifacts that illustrate how well the salesperson engaged the customer, those artifacts can be invaluable in evaluating sales execution. For example, during the qualifying stage in an environment where the company's sales model is focused on building trust, the seller may have specific information objectives that will help them better understand the customer and the sales opportunity while simultaneously indicating the level of trust being developed. In this case, comparing the information a seller obtained during customer conversations with these information objectives can provide an excellent proxy for actually observing the conversation. Missed or misinterpreted information can reveal gaps in selling proficiency that create opportunities for improvement. Thus, listening and communication training should be a high consideration for firms[20].

Once a comprehensive methodology is adopted, competency scoring and examining artifacts from selling activities can provide the basis for ongoing evaluation. To leverage these measures to drive better execution, the agenda for performance reviews should be modified to include a review of sales execution based on these metrics to help focus manager and seller attention on continuous improvement in sales execution as a means to achieving better sales results.

It is possible to fly without motors[21] … Measuring Sales Learning

As previously stated, effectively executing selling behaviors requires salespeople to possess the requisite skill and knowledge. Taking this a step further, as selling is a performance profession, executing the behaviors BETTER than the competition requires that salespeople continually improve their skills and knowledge or risk being overtaken by the competition. Given the direct connection between skill and knowledge, selling behaviors, and sales results, one might imagine that every sales organization would track this consistently. The reality is that very few measure this effectively, despite the fact that in larger organizations, the sales enablement function often includes learning and development professionals.

It isn't that these organizations track nothing regarding learning and development. It's that what they do track is often more focused on delivering training content than on acquiring knowledge and developing skills. This approach often treats learning as separate from selling, whereby classes are offered and completed periodically without measuring any change in selling behavior.

While affecting the design of learning programs to maximize behavioral impact is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that learning activities should have clearly defined learning objectives in terms of the selling behaviors that are to be impacted[22]. In addition, the impact these programs have on the execution of those behaviors should be tracked. To facilitate continuous improvement, sales organizations should look for opportunities to embed learning and development into the normal workflow, such that improvement happens weekly or monthly rather than once per year at the annual sales conference. To accomplish this, companies will most likely need to leverage an online learning library built around their sales methodology and regular coaching interactions to identify gaps in results and selling behaviors, the root cause of those gaps, and the appropriate learning activities to shrink the gaps and improve behaviors and results.

Don’t give up. Don’t ever give up[23]… Measuring Coaching Behaviors

Before moving to a discussion of capacity metrics, it’s important to spend a moment on sales coaching metrics. We’ve already mentioned several times about the important role coaching plays in driving selling execution and the development of the sales team. We’ve also included links to other resources. Given the critical role coaching can play in the overall success of the organization, it only makes sense that coaching behaviors also be measured[24].

This would include measuring both the quantity and the quality of coaching interactions. Quality metrics might include measures such as coaching sessions conducted, joint calls completed, or opportunities reviewed. Measuring the coaching quality of those interactions is a bit more nuanced and something very few organizations ever do. Since most coaching interactions focus only on the manager’s observations and feedback relative to the top two levels of the performance pyramid (results and behaviors), any session in which such feedback is given is considered effective – which is nearly all of them. However, a growing number of organizations are beginning to realize that coaching interactions that identify gaps in results or behaviors but don't identify the root cause of the gaps or provide sellers with learning activities to shrink those gaps really aren't having any lasting impact. In fact, these interactions are the sales equivalent of taking a golf lesson only to have the instructor tell you that you need to hit the ball better to improve your score but offer no insights about why you struggle now or any drill that would help you improve. Imagine how frustrating that would be … now imagine how frustrating it must be for salespeople faced with this same type of feedback. No wonder many salespeople find their managers to seem more like compliance officers than coaches. The fact that so many sales managers are spending more time on compliance issues and their own sales quota's is having a detrimental effect on even the best sales organizations. In fact, a recent study was undertaken to empirically determine the impact of sales manager time allocation decisions on sales team performance[25]. Figure 3 illustrates how the various predictive metrics are generally impacted by typical coaching interactions. A sample outline of a one-on-one coaching session covering the activity review and opportunity review can be found here.

A. NEW Prospects

B. NEW Opportunities being qualified

C. NEW Proposals

D. Average Sales Value

E. Ratios & cycle times for each of the following:
  - **a. New Prospect to Being Qualified**
  - **b. Being Qualified to Proposed**
  - **c. Proposed to Sold**

** Often misunderstood to be "Been Qualified"*

Figure 3

The good news is that this fundamental difference between feedback and coaching – the root cause analysis and assignment – ensures that effective coaching interactions have a measurable artifact in the form of an assignment. This means that coaching quantity metrics can be supplemented with quality metrics, such as assignments given, assignments completed, and improved behavior scores, to evaluate and improve coaching effectiveness. As is the case with any sports team, better coaching produces more effective execution and better outcomes. More information on effective coaching can be found in the GUIDE to Sales Coaching, and several blog posts, including Keystone Habits, Developing the Sales Athletes on Your Team.

Every person is born with talent[26]... Measuring Sales Capacity

We mentioned earlier that capacity represents the innate talents of people on the team. Much like height or speed, these innate talents can be refined and leveraged but not fundamentally changed. As such, they represent, to a certain degree, the limits and potential of people on the team. So, you might be asking yourself, if capacity can't really be changed, what's the value of measuring these characteristics at all? Great question!

Understanding the innate talents most relevant for a given sales role can help inform hiring and ensure we don't bring people into the organization who lack the capacity to be successful in the role[27]. If we don't measure any of these characteristics, we have no way to refine our understanding of which innate talents are more and less essential to the success of our sellers and coaches. Additionally, understanding innate characteristics such as communications styles, work styles, native intelligence, and intrinsic motivation can help managers to be more empathetic and effective in their coaching interactions[28]. Which capacity characteristics we measure can certainly vary, and there are a number of popular assessment tools to help evaluate these characteristics (Wonderlic, Meyers-Briggs, DISC, etc.). The key is to identify which characteristics most highly correlate to success and begin measuring them as early as possible and across as large an audience as we can.

Table 1 provides a list of sample metrics by category. Note that we have excluded two types of metrics presently used by many sales organizations:

- **CRM/other tool utilization metrics –** While these may be useful in helping enablement teams understand the value of tools, we do not believe tool utilization is an appropriate behavioral metric for all sales teams to track. One possible exception would be when utilization of a specific tool, such as a presentation platform like Showpad, is an integral part of the company's methodology. However, even in this case, we suggest effective utilization of the tool be included in scoring presentation effectiveness, not used as a stand-alone metric. Meanwhile, while CRM data health is essential to various other measures and the team's overall effectiveness, we see more instances where utilization metrics mask problems instead of helping identify them.

- **Pipeline health metrics –** As mentioned earlier in the discussion around predictive activity and proficiency metrics, many sales organizations track what has been aggregated at a sales stage rather than the flow of opportunities through the pipeline. In those cases, companies often apply a range of pipeline health metrics such as opportunity age, last date an opportunity record is touched, changes to forecasted close dates, etc., to massage forecasts and coach sellers. Unfortunately, we find this often results in unhealthy manipulation of CRM data rather than improved conversations with prospects and customers. For example, suppose a company determines that, statistically speaking, the probability of winning a given opportunity drops significantly once the opportunity age passes ninety days. Therefore, the company implements a policy to discount these from the sellers' pipeline and not count them toward the sellers' pipeline goal of 4X their quota. What can and often will happen is that sellers will simply delay entering data into the CRM so that the opportunity is perceived to be more recent, and they have more time to pursue it. While this is just one example, we've seen so many instances where funnel standards and pipeline health metrics conspire to drive unhealthy behaviors. Therefore, we've intentionally excluded them from this list.

Excluding these metrics from our list is not meant to imply they should never be used. We simply believe these two types of metrics tend to provide less value to the organization, as a rule, than the others shown here and often lead to unintended consequences that outweigh their value.

Metric Type	Metric	Description	Notes
Results Metrics	Opportunities Won	Number and dollar value of won sales	We recommend a bottom-up approach to setting most of these targets as this will likely lead to greater buy-in and higher objectives. This information should also be considered in relation to other variable such as sales expense and the number of salespeople. Where possible, market share should also be considered.
	Goal Attainment	% attainment of sales objective, however that was expressed	
	Gross Profit	Gross profit dollars or %	
	Discount Rate	% or dollar discount given, on average, per opportunity	
	Customer Churn	% of customers who fail to renew	
	Cancellation Rate	% of customers who cancel service before or shortly after activation	
	Forecast Accuracy	% above or below forecast	
Activity Metrics	Calls Attempted	Number of times calls are attempted, whether person is reached or not	Activity metrics around calls and meetings are generally easily obtained from existing tools like CRM with little or no data manipulation. However, it generally requires some CRM administration expertise to create reports on new opportunities and new proposals.
	Calls Completed	Number of times attempted calls result in actual conversation	
	Meetings Secured	Number of times a prospecting call results in securing a meeting, demo, follow up call	
	New Opportunities	Number of opportunities created in a given period	
	New Proposals	Subset of opportunities created in a given period that reach the proposal stage	

Metric Type	Metric	Description	Notes
Proficiency Metrics	Prospecting Success Ratio	% of prospecting calls that lead to a legitimate sales opportunity	When pulling reports and calculating these metrics it is important first to determine data set that will be used for all calculations. For example, first determine that you will evaluate opportunities created this year and create that set. THEN determine the % that are prosed and of those the % that are won.
	Proposal Ratio	% of new opportunities that result in a proposal	
	Closing Ratio	% of proposals that are closed	
	Average Sale Value	Average value in units or dollars of closed won opportunities	
	Average Sales Cycle	Time from when an opportunity is identified and when it is closed won	
Behavioral Metrics	Competency Score	Demonstrated effectiveness with key selling behaviors, usually a 1 – 5 scale	These metrics are designed to provide insights about the executing of your selling methodology. As such, the methodology must be clearly defined, and the sales team must agree that leveraging the methodology effectively will enable them to be more successful. Competency scores should work for any defined selling methodology. Information, Account Health Scores, and Win Probability scores are examples of execution artifacts and may vary depending on your methodology.
	Information Gathered	Information gathered by salesperson on each opportunity relative to information objectives from your selling methodology	
	Account Health Scores	Measure of the overall account health by account for organizations that have key account managers	
	Win Probability Scores	Preferably a calculated value based on what sellers know about each opportunity and NOT sales stage	

<table>
<tr><th>Metric Type</th><th>Metric</th><th>Description</th><th>Notes</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Learning Metrics</td><td>Learning Assigned</td><td>Assignments given by manager or learning organization, will be compared to completed</td><td rowspan="4">While completed learning versus assigned learning can help identify commitment, measuring learning impact is also key. The requires ability to cross reference specific learning with associated selling behaviors to evaluate learning impact. The most crucial thing here is a consistent cadence of learning across the organization.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Learning Completed</td><td>Learning activities completed</td></tr>
<tr><td>Learning Score</td><td>Comprehension and possibly even competency scores for learning assignments where available</td></tr>
<tr><td>Behaviors Impacted</td><td>Cross reference above with behavioral competency scores</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Coaching Metrics</td><td>Coaching Sessions</td><td>How many times per seller, per period, a manager has formal, documented coaching conversations</td><td rowspan="4">The metrics are designed to ensure managers are fulfilling their crucial role as coaches and that their interactions extend beyond mere feedback. Difference between assignments given and completed can also help identify any accountability issues that may exist within the team.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Competencies Scored</td><td>Measure of how many times managers are evaluating and scoring the selling behaviors either by observing customer meetings, reviewing recorded calls, or role-playing with sellers</td></tr>
<tr><td>Learning Assigned</td><td>Number of assignments given per seller in a period</td></tr>
<tr><td>Learning Completed</td><td>Number of assignments given that were completed</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><th>Metric Type</th><th>Metric</th><th>Description</th><th>Notes</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Capacity Metrics</td><td>Native Intelligence</td><td>A measure such as Wonderlic to determine innate intelligence, may or may not be predictive of sales success</td><td rowspan="3">These metrics are samples only. The capacity metrics you use will depend on your selling environment, culture, and other variables. Use these metrics to evaluate potential sales candidates and to help managers better engage with their people.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Communications Style</td><td>Measuring the default communications style using DISC or similar model</td></tr>
<tr><td>Aptitude Scores</td><td>Use to measure ability to acquire knowledge and develop skill such as technical aptitude or agility</td></tr>
</table>

There is no such thing as failure[29]... Using Metrics to Drive Excellence

Now that we've discussed the sales performance metrics we should be capturing, let's examine how they should be used.

First, we mentioned earlier a basic principle that enables us to use metrics effectively, and it bears repeating here. Whenever possible, measures should be compared to goals and examined for changes over time, as this approach will provide the insights needed to improve coaching, learning, and selling effectiveness and even improve the accuracy of our forecasts. To use metrics in this way, we need to think in terms of two approaches to evaluating them: gap analysis and trend analysis.

With gap analysis, we are comparing a given measure to the goal for that metric. Assuming there is a gap between the target and actual number, we want to dive deeper to understand the root cause of that gap. For many individual metrics, this is done via a collaborative discussion between the manager and seller. For gaps being experienced across a broad spectrum of the team, this may involve a more comprehensive root cause analysis that includes people from sales, marketing, and other organizations in the business. While the root cause analysis could always reveal environmental issues such as competitor behaviors or market conditions that are impacting the metric, it is critical to look beyond these factors to determine whether or not there are behaviors that could impact the metric in spite of any environmental conditions. In order words, we want to regularly ask the question, "What could have been done in light of these conditions to achieve the objective?"

There are two other important points to keep in mind when evaluating gaps in our metrics. First, gaps should not be treated like failures and should not be punished formally or informally. The most critical objective in measuring anything is understanding the truth about what is really happening. If every gap is considered a failure that is punished, people will likely learn to hide gaps instead of addressing them. This leads to the second point. Gaps above targets are as important to evaluate as gaps where performance is below target. Understanding how objectives are surpassed can reveal insights and best practices that can be scaled across the organization. These gaps can also help us to set more reasonable targets, as in some cases, they are exceeded merely because they were set too low in the first place.

Trend analysis is similar in that we want to understand the root cause for the metric. By instead focusing on the gap between the actual and target for the metric, we are focused on the change over time. If our number of new opportunities added per week is declining, or perhaps our sales cycle time is extending month over month, we need to understand if that's the result of something happening in our selling behavior or because of an environmental condition. Again, we will do that through collaborative conversations with our sellers as well as taking input from others in the organization when the trends appear across a number of people or teams.

As you can see, leveraging metrics to affect positive changes and performance improvement requires the ability to conduct an effective root cause examination[30]. There are variety of resources that can help people develop broad problem-solving and root cause analysis (RCA) skills[31]. Axiom's GUIDE to Sales Coaching also provides a framework for this conversation during one-on-one coaching interactions.

Besides using these metrics in weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly conversations between managers and sellers, team results for the metrics should be included in sales operations reviews between sales managers and senior business leaders. As mentioned earlier, the misalignment of metrics used by boards and senior leaders to evaluate performance and those used by managers and sellers to deliver results, creates an enormous strain on the organization[32]. In addition, having sales managers focus their reviews with senior leaders exclusively on sales results, accounts, and opportunities minimizes the importance of sales coaching and overemphasizes the importance of selling. Given that most sales managers were promoted because they were effective sellers, it is essential we measure and evaluate their coaching effectiveness, lest they revert to spending their time selling and fail to develop the players on their team. While this goes without saying, in other performance professions, such as athletics, it represents an enormous mental shift for most sales organizations. Player development is a core part of leader-coach meetings in sports and must become an essential part of the conversation in sales if we are to field the most skilled and knowledgeable sellers possible. This means the sales operations review between managers and senior leaders should also include an overview of the team's performance against the behavioral and learning objectives, not just the results metrics. While it is common for leaders to envision salespeople in terms of A, B, and C players, progressive sales organizations must move beyond categorizing people in relative terms and elevate the skill, knowledge, and execution wherever possible. Imagine a sales team of fifty people who all get more proficient at just one skill per week, every week of the year. At the end of one year, the team has improved in 2,500 skills – the company is putting a significantly better team on the field. And better teams win more often!

In addition to using these metrics to facilitate better coaching and identify broader environmental conditions that may be impacting our success, we should be using them to make better hiring decisions[33]. By analyzing the link between capacity characteristics and success for sellers and coaches, we can make better decisions about who to hire and promote. When we know we can leverage learning and coaching to develop certain skills and help people acquire the knowledge needed to succeed in a given role, we can expand the potential talent pool as we are able to hire closer to our ideal profile for innate talents instead of people who already possess that skill and knowledge. Tools to help define ideal sales candidates and interview more effectively can be downloaded here.

Never confuse motion with action[34] … Final Word and Next Steps

For too many companies, the sales function is broken. Sales deliver inconsistent and unpredictable results with an often-nebulous ROI. In fact, one senior sales leader we met lamented spending $2B in sales commission and not having any clue what they actually got for it. Frankly, we find this as frustrating as that sales leader did.

At Axiom, we share a mission with a growing number of universities – to elevate the sales profession[35]. For us, that means equipping salespeople to become trusted advisors to everyone they meet so that they can help buyers make better, more informed decisions. This leads to greater fulfillment for both the buyer and the seller and better business outcomes, including:

- Superior top-line sales results and improved profitability.

- Improved sales consistency as buyers value the expertise of and relationship with the sales professional serving them.

- Better predictability. Buyers are more transparent with sellers, who, in turn, have a more objective view of their chances of winning a given opportunity.

- Enhanced efficiency as salespeople wastes less time on opportunities they cannot win and convert a higher percentage of those they can win.

Affecting this change and achieving these results requires sales organizations to apply more rigor and science to measuring performance. Sales enablement teams have a tremendous opportunity to lead this charge and deliver sustainable competitive advantage to the business.

This leads us to recommended next steps. If you've read all the way to this point, you've probably gotten the sense that we've spent decades studying, discussing, and working with many sales organizations and a broad range of sales effectiveness initiatives. Based on our experience working on metrics with many varied organizations, we suggest these next steps for anyone who wants to achieve sales excellence by improving their sales performance metrics:

1. Assess the current state of your existing sales performance metrics. Some organizations require a comprehensive overhaul, while others need only minor adjustments to optimize their sales performance metrics.

2. Share your assessment with sales leadership to get alignment on the current state before developing any remediation plan.

3. Prioritize the metrics you want to implement, as it is generally best to affect this change in phases over time rather than trying to implement many changes all at once. We suggest focusing first on the metrics at the top of the performance pyramid and working down from there.

4. Meet with senior leadership to rationalize and align the metrics the team will use to affect sales performance with those leaders that need to report to the board. Work to eliminate any unnecessary or duplicate effort for the team.

5. Before implementing any behavioral or learning metrics, be certain you have defined and launched your ideal selling methodology along with learning activities to support ongoing rep development. If this isn't already in place, behavioral and learning metrics can be introduced alongside the methodology deployment.

6. Once the selling methodology is defined, we strongly recommend you define and implement a coaching model that clearly distinguishes effective coaching from manager feedback. This is essential to leveraging your metrics to drive sales excellence.

7. Implement your metrics according to your phased plan and begin reporting. Be certain to create a feedback loop with sellers, managers, and senior leaders to ensure metrics are being used properly and that they are supporting the desired outcomes.

8. Continue to optimize your metrics based on analysis and feedback. And remember to celebrate accuracy and improvement often.

You may find a variety of challenges along the way. And chances are we've experienced them ourselves. If and when you do, we hope you will reach out and share your thoughts or any questions you have. We are anxious to help in any way we can.

Bob Sanders

Bob Sanders currently serves as CEO of Axiom Sales Kinetics, a company he previously led from 2009 to 2018. Before acquiring Axiom with his current partners, Bob served as Chief Operating Officer for Reflect Systems, where he helped create a successful outcome for investors, employees, and customers when the company was sold to Creative Realities in 2022.

At Axiom Sales Kinetics, we've spent thirty years helping sales teams coach, learn, and sell more effectively. We offer a unique alternative to traditional sales training. Unlike traditional sales training events, we embed our methodology into your sales cadence, delivering dramatically better sales results. To learn more about Selling the Axiom Way, our Kinetics Sales Effectiveness Platform, or our unique, guaranteed approach, please visit us at www.axiomsaleskinetics.com.

Charles Wayne Keene

Charles Wayne Keene, Ed.D. currently serves as the Associate Dean, Undergraduate Program Office for the Tippie College of Business at the University of Iowa. Additionally, he is a Professor of Instruction in the Marketing Department and specializes in teaching B2B sales. Before his appointment at Iowa, he was the founding Director of the Center for Sales and Customer Development in the Trulaske College of Business at the University of Missouri. At Missouri, he also founded the first-of-its-kind Inside Sales Lab and was affiliated with the Sales Education Foundation. His professional experience in sales was primarily in the steel industry in the Midwest. He has co-authored academic publications in the areas of case-based reasoning (CBR) and problem-based learning environments (PBLE), using his sales experience as the foundation of the research.

Footnotes

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[25]Rapp, A. A., Petersen, J. A., Hughes, D. E., & Ogilvie, J. L. (2020).

[26]Quote from Maya Angelou

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[29]Partial quote by Tony Robbins

[30]Lilly, B., Porter, T. W., & Meo, A. W. (2003).

[31]Wilson, Paul F., Larry D. Dell, and Gaylord F. Anderson (1993)

[32]Hoyle, J. A., Dingus, R., & Wilson, J. H. (2020)

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