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Building a Sales Assembly Line

Before the industrial revolution, “craftsman” production was the principal form of manufacturing. Under this approach, a single worker would be solely responsible for completing a product from start to finish. This was relatively inefficient, as the craftsman could only manufacture a relatively small number of products, of uneven quality, at any given time.

Modern Business Models

At the turn of the twentieth century, it became clear that the craftsman’s way of doing business was no longer going to be effective to meet growing demand. This situation was rectified when manufacturers began to implement assembly lines.

Modern manufacturing relied upon:

1. Labor specialization
2. Mathematics and operational theory that would help determine best practices
3. Specialized tools that ensured that each line worker adhered to the identified best practices, automated and optimize the end-to-end manufacturing process

The adoption of these techniques ushered in the Second Industrial Revolution and fostered an unprecedented and phenomenal increase in productivity and material wealth.

A parallel can be drawn between the craftsman form of production and the sales approaches used by most B2B sellers today. Like the craftsman, the account executive is often responsible for a large portion of the sales process. Many do everything from cold-calling to customer success and own the sales process in their defined territory. As with the craftsman, this sales person is time constrained and serves as a bottleneck to growth. In fact, it is almost impossible to scale using this “old fashioned” model.

Instead to scale, sellers must be able to to mass-produce sales at a cost-effective price. The only way that this can be done is to apply many of the same techniques that traditional manufacturers have relied upon to increase their volume, standardize their quality, and lower their production costs. Specifically, a sales assembly line seller must adopt sales specialization, ensure that best practices are repeated over and over again, and use technology to ensure compliance and to optimize the process. Each is discussed below.

Sales Specialization

In his 1776 treatise, The Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith observed the benefits of the division of labor. This principle became the cornerstone of mass production theory. Before that, the traditional craftsman typically undertook many tasks that were only tangentially related to his primary skill. For example, not only would a blacksmith produce the horseshoes, but he would also source the raw materials, design the product, initially meet with the customer, and haggle over price. After the sale was made, he would produce the shoe, possibly deliver it to the farmer, and even install the shoe on the horse. Clearly, all these tasks dramatically reduced his horseshoe-making effectiveness! Moreover, the overall cost to make and sell the product had to be much higher to take into account all the other functions that he had to perform.

With the advent of the assembly line, manufacturers adopted the theory of labor specialization to lower the cost of production and to increase throughput. On an assembly line, each worker was normally assigned one specific task, which he or she would repeat over and over again. The key to making the line operate in a cost-effective manner was to ensure that the “right worker” was assigned to each task.

The “right worker” would be the individual best suited to perform the activity from an ability and cost perspective. This meant that in almost all cases, it was not necessary to have a highly-skilled, expensive expert working at every stage of the manufacturing process. Instead, many tasks could be completed by a less skilled and therefore less expensive laborer.

In what is known as a “Generalist” model, a traditional sales professional would normally function in a similar manner as the traditional craftsman. He or she would not only be responsible for selling the product or service but also handle most of the tasks that surround the sale. Specifically, the Generalist would research potential leads, undertake localized marketing campaigns, cold-call prospects, prepare correspondence, conduct the sales call, and perform any necessary follow-up to close the deal.

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For example, in the case of a sales development representative, who has developed a special skill for calling prospects and convincing them to schedule an appointment, this professional should not research his or her own leads, as this would lower his or her overall throughput. Instead, this task should be given to a relatively junior marketing professional who might be more proficient in data search. This task-winnowing exercise should continue until the sales process closely resembles an assembly line.

An optimized sales assembly line contains the following stages:

Lead Management: Determines flow and quantity of leads necessary. Enters inbound leads and batches of raw prospects into the sales automation system.

- Outbound lead research: Identifies, sources, and tests leads purchased from third parties
- Social media research: Identifies potential leads and connects through social media

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Campaign Management: Determines how leads should be dealt with by sales development reps (SDRs).

Jr. Sales Development Reps: Calls and identifies prospects that are willing to answer the phone.

Sr. Sales Development Rep: Responds to inbound leads and cold-calls outbound leads.

Demo Gurus: Jr. Account Executives that perform Discovery Calls/Demonstrations.

Sr. Account Executives: Moves leads through the sales funnel until they close or die.

- Sales Assistants: Prepare sales materials and coordinate actions with prospects
- Sales Engineers: Help conduct appointments and develop solutions
- Fulfillment Coordinator: Professional that helps lock down the terms of any potential deal

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Customer Success Groups: Owns the client experience and handles renewals.

- Technical Support
- Onboarding

Business Development: Identifies and works upsell opportunities.

Note: See the Stages on the Sales Assembly Line white paper for a detailed description of each task.

Discovery of Repeatable, Best Practices

Assembly lines would not work effectively if production decisions were left to the individual workers. Consider what would happen on a traditional manufacturing assembly line if each worker was allowed to perform a task as he or she saw fit. While many products might be produced, it is highly likely that each product would be slightly different and the quality would be uneven at best. Therefore, one of the hallmarks of a traditional manufacturing assembly line is that it produces the same exact product over and over again. When it is working properly there should be no discernible difference between each item coming off the line.

To operate properly, every action along the line must be centrally planned, tightly controlled, and above all else, repeatable over and over again.

To be successful, every step in the manufacturing process must be determined in the utmost detail so that a series of best practices are developed.

Then, the line must be constantly monitored to ensure that every repeatable action is being followed to the exact specifications. Not only does this ensure a consistent result, but the massive data sets generated from the processes can be mathematically analyzed so that the results can continually be used to refine and continually improve the assembly line's overall operating performance.

To establish best practices on a sales assembly, the first step is to centrally plan the sales process from start to finish. This exercise starts with creating a sales map. This is a diagram of each and every function undertaken by the organization when making a new or renewal sale. To optimize the process, each primary function must be broken down into individual tasks in excruciating detail. It is critical that every action, no matter how seemingly small, is identified and dissected.

Once the sales map has been developed, it is necessary to figure out how to optimize each task. Remember that most existing methods have been developed through a fundamentally flawed trial-and-error process. If these same outdated practices are followed in the sales assembly line environment, the company will forfeit many of the benefits associated with specialization and will also achieve a less than optimal close rate. Therefore, to successfully hyperscale, a high-velocity sales assembly line must find a way to identify the best practices for each task.

While many of these decisions can be made by multidisciplinary teams that carefully examine and weigh different approaches, in some cases it will be necessary to scientifically determine the right approach. Whether it uses third-party data, A/B tests, or other forms of statistical analysis, the seller's goal is to develop a series of processes that lead to a higher level of throughput or close rate.

This work plan will become the North Star for the team as it prepares to implement the sales assembly line.

The decision to adopt a new sales approach is not an easy one to make. It is natural to feel apprehensive about moving away from a well-trodden, conventional strategy—While the effort can certainly be designed and spearheaded by the VP of sales or VP of marketing, a decision this important demands the direct involvement of the CEO, who will need to be the main force behind the transformation. Since the sales assembly line spans so many in-house departments, without strong leadership, it is doubtful that the entire organization will have the courage and internal fortitude to make this type of change. In my experience, in situations where the CEO has not been an active participant in moving the entire company in the same direction, the end result has been less than optimal.

Tools to Monitor Best Practices

In the sales environment, it can be difficult to convince the professionals on the line to follow the established procedures, as they are accustomed to having a great deal of leeway on how they deal with their daily responsibilities. However, if systems are not put into place to ensure actions are repeatable and strictly followed, the entire effort of figuring out what works and what doesn't will have been for naught. There are a number of ways that this can be accomplished in the sales assembly line environment, including the following:

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The brute force method, in which management exerts influence over the staff. In this light, many companies have hired a director of sales operation, whose role is to oversee the staff and ensure that they are complying with established procedures. In our experience, while this can be helpful, the "Big Brother" aspect of it can sometimes impede compliance.

If the system controlling the sales assembly line can generate both real-time and historical performance data and share it with each professional, this can positively influence behavior without being overbearing. The gamification of this sharing process with leader boards, internal contests, and so on, can certainly encourage sales professionals to comply with the established best practices.

However, the best way to make the processes repeatable is to provide the professionals with specialized tools that enable them to easily perform the tasks under their purview. In a perfect world, these tools will have been customized for each action, which eliminates the friction that often impedes compliance. In this light, it is extremely important to provide tools that only allow individuals to undertake the prescribed action. All too often, in trying to be something for everyone, sales automation systems provide an endless menu of choices.

Having a myriad of choices is a prescription for the professional to stray from established procedures.

Specialized Technology to Manage and Optimize a Sales Assembly Line

When a single craftsman manufactured a product, he needed only needed a relatively unsophisticated tool set to be successful. This ceases to be the case in an assembly line environment. Not only does each worker need specialized tools that enable them to perform their repetitive task easily, but it is critical that systems are in place that constantly evaluate the performance of every aspect of the process so that it can undergo a constant cycle of continual improvement. In addition, with a high volume of product being produced across a number of stages, specialized technology helps to ensure that the product moves from step to step efficiently and effectively. Finally, tools are need to ensure that the line operates in a state of homeostasis otherwise can grind to a halt.

The same holds true in a sales assembly line environment. In a traditional sales environment, most sales professionals rely on relatively simplistic CRM software that was developed for the Generalist. Such systems often suffer from shortcomings when they are employed in a sales assembly line environment.

- They are very complex because they are driven by the need to support a single professional's ability to handle multiple, unrelated tasks.
- They do not tightly structure the sales process, because they support the concept of providing the sales professional with a great deal of freedom on how to handle each sales asset.
- They are territory based, which prevents equalization of assets.
- They do not ensure that each stage working with one another in established parameters.
- They do not handle large volumes of sales assets (leads, prospects, opportunities, customers) efficiently.
- They collect information via a free-form process, which limits the system's ability to statistically analyze the data.
- They do not seamlessly support sales specialization, so moving sale assets from one stage to the next is not seamless or easy to accomplish.

To try and counteract the above deficiencies, numerous third-party sales automation applications have been developed that sit on top of the basic CRM system. However, because the underlying foundation is so inappropriate for the specialized use case, the resulting sales stacks are expensive and difficult to implement, maintain, and use. Therefore, to optimize a sales assembly line, sellers must use specialized technology designed to support the unique characteristics of this sales approach.

In general, it is important that any system has the following attributes:

Sales Asset Flow Control: Any system must ensure that the human capital on the assembly line is efficiently employed. As such, the system must carefully calibrate the flow of sales assets to each professional to ascertain that they are dealing with the optimal number at any given time. For example, if a sales professional has too many opportunities, then he or she will not keep up and will likely cherry-pick, which will lower the overall close rate. Alternatively, if the professionals are presented with too few leads, they will be underproductive. Making this task more difficult is the fact that the system must calculate the optimal flow so that every station is working in equilibrium with one another.

Raw Material Planning: For the assembly line to function, there must be a constant, steady supply of the materials needed to produce a sale. Specifically, taking into account production volume and timing, management needs to determine how many leads are necessary to introduce into the system on a daily basis. Similarly, it is critical to understand how many references the sales professionals will need to maintain the targeted close rate.

Randomization/Equalization: Continuous process improvement is a hallmark of any sales assembly line system. To accomplish this scientifically, it is absolutely critical to distribute sales assets to each professional on the line in a randomized but equal manner. If this is not done, it makes it impossible to compare the performance of each person and of the line itself. For example, if leads are distributed to sales professionals by territory, it is difficult to compare the results of sales professionals operating in different geographic regions.

Timing: How long a sales asset stays at each node of the assembly line and how much time the individual workers have to complete their respective tasks are critical factors that the system controlling the line must take into account. Otherwise, bottlenecks can occur that dramatically decrease the efficiency of the sales process. For instance, if it takes on average two minutes to process a cold call, the line must automatically make sure that the SDR does not receive more than thirty leads per hour.

Role-Specific Functionality: Since specialization is so important, any system must support this concept and ensure that each worker on the line has specialized software that allows them to accomplish their task in an efficient and effective manner while collecting a wide range of performance data.

The only way this can be done is to customize Saleforce, Salesloft, Xant, etc. Unfortunately, this customization process is extremely expensive (hundreds of thousands of dollars) and time consuming. Moreover, our experience is that because the foundation is so broken, they never are quite able to make it work perfectly. It should be noted that to make up for this deficiency, xSellerate has used its Assembly CRM in each companies that it has worked with. This enterprise CRM package is only available to clients of xSellerate.