



# DATA ANALYTICS AND THE SALES LEADER

Bringing the science of sales to your organization

- The customer relationship has long been the center of the sales function. The best sales leaders were those with personal relationships with buyers and deep intuition about customer needs based on years of experience. While those qualities are still helpful, they are no longer sufficient. Today, the most forward-thinking companies are using data analytics to improve the effectiveness of the sales function. Big data is allowing organizations and their sales leadership to know much more about customers and their needs. Real-time information is being gathered from sources as varied as social media and weather reports and combined with traditional consumer data to help streamline and improve sales, as well as pinpoint new opportunities. Predictive analytics are used to uncover patterns in how customers buy, identifying the most likely prospects and products to sell to them. A study by McKinsey & Company estimates that those companies that use big data and analytics effectively show profitability and productivity rates that are 5 to 6 percent higher than those of their peers.

But how are the most effective sales leaders transitioning their organizations to take advantage of the data analytics opportunity? We've learned from our conversations with sales leaders that bringing the science of sales to your organization is much more difficult than simply hiring a room full of data scientists. The best sales leaders are focused on doing three key things to embed a commitment to data and analytics throughout their organizations.

## 1. Lead a cultural change

The immense volume of data and the significant investment required in people, technology and the organization can be overwhelming. It can be tempting for organizations to simply give up on realizing the potential of big data. The sales officer must clearly define a realistic course ahead; maximizing big data is a journey, not a quick flip of a switch. Sales leaders must lead the charge — with the visible support of the management team — so that the entire organization embraces the impact big data can have on sales and the company. Sales leaders should also lead by example, bringing data rather than anecdotes into meetings to demonstrate the importance of the organization's shift and the power of compelling data-driven insights.

“Data is a wonderful source of truth,” said Donna Broome, senior vice president of sales and marketing at heavy-duty truck and trailer part supplier FleetPride, “but you need to demand its use by your organization.” Tying the use of data to incentives or other methods to promote accountability helps embed a commitment to big data throughout the organization. “Our highly disciplined use of data is critical to how we manage the organization, monitor performance and drive continuous improvement,” said Matt Thompson, executive vice president of worldwide field operations at Adobe Systems. “And reps know that their data is available to the highest levels of the company, which also focuses them on performance improvement.”

## 2. Keep it simple

Analytics need to serve front-line reps. To be successful, sales leaders must ensure that complex information is synthesized and presented as clear, actionable guidance to sales teams. Simple dashboards with recommended actions for product offers, pricing or negotiating strategies have been shown to produce dramatic results. Analytics are even being used to arm sales people with the most relevant talking points to guide their customer interactions. “We use a very prescriptive approach, sending out regular emails to our customers' front-line sales reps that specifically outline how to increase their sales,” said Eric Hills, senior vice president of marketing and sales for predictive guidance company Zilliant. “Sales growth is often dependent on the ability of reps to overcome the ‘last mile’ to close a deal, and we want to make that as easy as possible.” However, there is such a thing as too much data; successful leaders often have to serve as editors, focusing on clear, executable recommendations for critical pivot points during the sales process. “The better leaders are simplifying it for the sales person versus giving them so much that they spend all their time clicking and asking questions and no time selling,” said Broome. “The whole point of data is to make it so that our reps can go out there faster with less pre-planning.”

## 3. Focus on the long term

Sales leaders must make a conscious decision to implement a data-driven optimization strategy for it to be successful. As Hills points out, “It's easy to get into these projects, realize your company has bad data and end there. Sales leaders have to realize that implementing data, and more importantly, actionable guidance, into the sales process is a long-term commitment.” A long-term perspective about data can also translate into a competitive advantage. “The market has become hypercompetitive,” said Thompson. “You need to be looking out three to five years at how you go to market, and working toward that strategy to build the right capabilities in your field.” For Adobe, this includes ensuring that all new sales

hires possess basic analytic and quantitative skills. At the same time, sales leaders must strike a balance between progress and the organization's level of adaptability. Broome cautions, "You need to understand your organization's capacity for change and not try to do too much too fast because it just won't work." An ongoing commitment of time and resources and a passion for seeing it through are key to successful implementation of a data strategy for a sales organization.

## Conclusion

As Broome notes, data can be a powerful mythbuster for those companies that properly use sales analytics and can be leveraged to help facilitate positive change across a sales team and the broader organization. One of the greatest benefits of implementing data-driven sales approaches is informed experimentation on the front lines, which has the potential to produce game-changing results. While the benefits of sales analytics are great, they can only be realized by sales leaders with the skills not only to understand and use the data, but to inspire the sales organization to fully embrace it.

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