Linkedin

HOW PERSONALIZED SELLING UNLOCKS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

A MESSAGE TO THE RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN SALES PROFESSIONAL

We've all done it. We connect with someone on social media with little expectation of developing a deeper relationship – the digital equivalent of "let's do lunch." It's a well-intentioned gesture, but not a genuine invitation to build a long-lasting relationship.

Today, too many organizations are using social interactions as a way to make a quick impression, rather than an opportunity to foster a mutually beneficial experience. In a world where we constantly have our eye on the immediate goals of delivering the right message to the right audience at the right time, we overlook key elements: relationships and relevance.

Now, imagine a world where the salesperson, sales leadership and marketing executives are focused on inspiring a sense of community – not just closing the next deal. It's time to completely re-imagine the way all revenue-generating professionals work – where we're engaging with prospects to understand their buying intent signals and address their actual pain points. That's where LinkedIn can help.

LinkedIn is positioned to become the new "system of engagement" for your sales team.

Leveraging our data on 400 million+ members and companies can transform the way that sales pros target relevant buyers. This information trove has the ability to empower sales pros to understand buyers' needs and enable them to act on that information to close deals.

It's time to change "what is" and set out to bring "what could be" to social selling.

Are you in?

Alex Hisaka
Content Marketing Manager
LinkedIn Sales Solutions

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SALES REPS

BECOME A TRUSTED RESOURCE

Imagine, for a moment, that you're in the market for a new project management application. As a smart consumer, you've done your research online and have a good sense of the features you want, but you still have some questions for the sales rep before you seal the deal. You ask the rep how the product works, but he dives right into his sales pitch without attempting to understand your needs.

Unfortunately, this scenario is all too common. In a world where personalization is rapidly becoming the standard, we're quick to reject anything that feels generic or impersonal. And the heightened expectations we've adopted as consumers carry over into our professional lives.

For sales pros, this presents a new set of challenges. Buyers no longer have patience for the tried and true sales tactics you've been using for years. In their minds, cold calls, discovery questions and standardized sales pitches are all signals that you don't understand them. In this new selling environment, you've got a few seconds to connect with the buyer and demonstrate that you can address their needs. In fact, according to SmartInsights, **it only takes 3 seconds to get someone's attention.**

To get prospects to respond, you need to communicate from the beginning that you understand their situation, needs and challenges. That's why it's critical to know as much as possible about your prospect before you conduct outreach.

The highest level of reported buyer/seller interaction for all buying scenarios occurred during the education phase of the buyer's journey.

–SiriusDecisions' *Buying Interactions Model*

SALES REPS

While buyers may be engaging with salespeople later in the process, clearly there are opportunities for sellers to play an indispensable role from the start. In fact, contrary to conventional beliefs, the highest level of reported buyer/seller interaction for all buying scenarios occurred during the education phase of the buyer's journey, according to *SiriusDecisions' Buying Interactions Model.*

Sales reps provide obvious value at the later stages of the buying cycle, when prospects are focused on finding the right solution and selecting a vendor. However, it is a mistake for sales reps to limit their engagement to the end of the decision-making process. If salespeople are engaged with buyers during the research and education stage, they can provide valuable insight that competitors are mostly likely not offering.

BECOME A TRUSTED RESOURCE

Sales rep interactions have the biggest impact during the education phase.

67% Education

55% Solution

54% Selection

Source:
SiriusDecisions' *2015 B-to-B Buyer Study*

TARGET RELEVANT BUYERS

If you're looking for a way to make B2B buyers 4x more likely to connect with you, know who they are and what they do. LinkedIn's research revealed that **only half of B2B buyers contacted by sales professionals are the right person to talk to about new business.** Even though it takes more time to research a prospect's role and decision-making ability, you will achieve better results when you connect with more of the right people.

Here are a few ways to find the right buyers who are both interested in your products and services and exhibit an intent to buy:

Make the most of Advanced Search
LinkedIn's Advanced Search provides a powerful set of filters that can help find the people you want to connect with. You can identify these professionals in four main ways:

- **By Relationship**—Identify LinkedIn members who are connected to you directly (1st degree connections), members who are connected to you through a common connection (2nd degree connections), and members who share a common LinkedIn Group with you and everyone else.
- **By Industry**—Since these are fairly generic classifications, see what industry classification your clients put on their profiles.
- **By Company**—You can search by keyword, but company names will also be indexed if they have created a Company Page.
- **By Location**—LinkedIn has defined geographic locations that can be indexed for easy search filtering.

Automate searches to gain access to the buyer sooner
Consider monitoring your connections for "trigger events" to help you identify new sales prospects who are currently in the market for your product or service.

Examples of trigger events may include:

- Changes at your prospect's company – such as an expansion or product launch; or
- When a connection gets a promotion or a new job.

These are specific times when prospects are more open to engaging with sales professionals.

ASK THE EXPERT:

CRAIG ROSENBERG

Chief Analyst, TOPO

LI: How did you start using data-driven segmentation to target the right buyers?

CR: The first thing is a mentality change, which says that as an organization you want to make quantifiable decisions on who sales should spend their precious time on. The decision should be based on determining who the accounts/personas are that are most likely to become customers.

Step one is to define your Ideal Customer Profile (ICP) as it pertains to the type of accounts that are most likely to close.

Then you want to define the target personas in those accounts. The next step is to study these accounts/personas to determine the pains/challenges they are typically trying to solve when buying your product, the triggers that spur them into action, and then the types of actions they take when they are in the process of evaluating a solution like yours. If you can quantify any or all of this, all the better.

LI: What are the benefits of targeting buyers based on interest and intent?

CR: Reaching people is hard. Period. And time is the enemy of every salesperson. When you do finally get your opportunity, you want to talk to accounts/personas that are interested in hearing more. The buyer is headed in the right direction and the ability to have a meaningful conversation is higher.

LI: What are three tips for targeting the right buyers on LinkedIn?

CR: Ask yourself:

1. Are they the right type of company/persona (or role)?
2. Have they publicly displayed some level of interest in what you do? (For example: If you sell CRM, are they in multiple CRM groups?)
3. More advanced: Have they publicly expressed pains, challenges, etc. that you solve? (For example: status update or post in a group.)

LI: How can targeting the right buyers generate more revenue?

CR: Time equals revenue. You have limited opportunities to sell, so you want to spend time on the people who are more likely to respond and ultimately buy. It's pretty simple. We spend a lot of time working on things that become nothing. Literally. Increasing your odds will increase revenue.

UNDERSTAND THE BUYING PROCESS

A senior executive can be a powerful ally for a sales professional. But their high level of responsibility means senior executives have to be careful about who they trust. Stanford social psychologist Roderick Kramer reports **that 8 out of 10 senior executives have been burned in their career because they trusted the wrong person.**

Building trust has been and always will be a critical component of selling. When you're dealing with a senior-level prospect, it's even more important to tailor your approach to the concerns that come with their job description. Here are three ways you can use LinkedIn to help earn their trust:

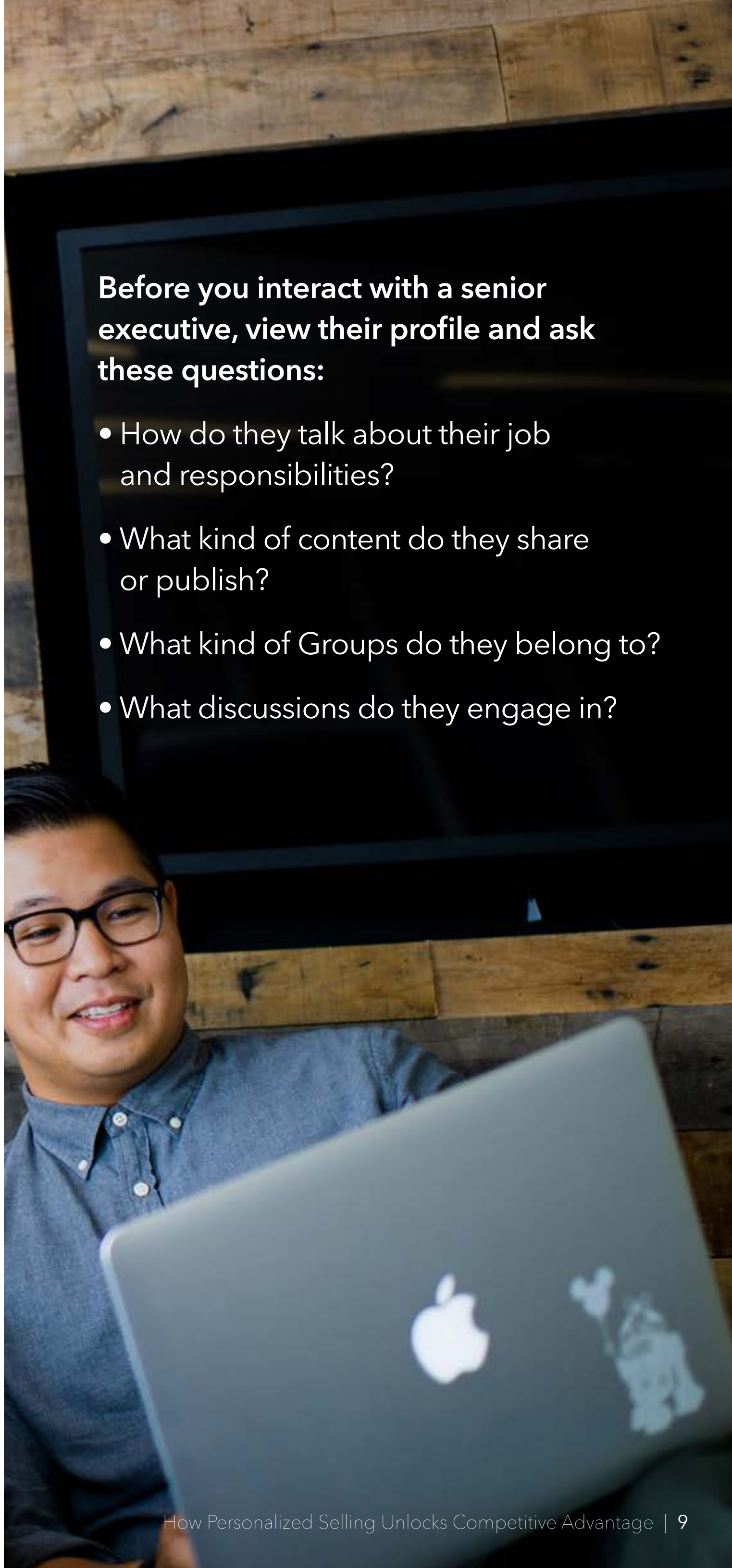
Project Expertise

Senior executives need to know that the sales professionals they work with have the knowledge and expertise to do the job. Establish a foundation for your expertise by optimizing your LinkedIn profile to reflect your professional brand. Provide concrete examples of your past successes and your customer-centric philosophy.

After optimizing your profile, you can demonstrate your expertise with a little targeted research. To better understand the potential challenges you can help solve, look at what the executive's company is sharing on LinkedIn and check out the executive's own LinkedIn activity. IDC reports that **63% of social buyers appreciate being contacted at the right time with relevant opportunities.**

Respect their time

A senior-level executive receives a lot of inbound communication. Use InMail to stay out of their crowded email queue, and keep it brief with a clear statement of why you're contacting them and the next step you're proposing. If you can make your message memorable without getting off track, even better.



Before you interact with a senior executive, view their profile and ask these questions:

- How do they talk about their job and responsibilities?
- What kind of content do they share or publish?
- What kind of Groups do they belong to?
- What discussions do they engage in?

Provide Social Proof

According to IDC, **44% of buyers find potential vendors by looking at shared LinkedIn connections.** When you view the executive's profile, LinkedIn will show you connections the two of you share. If you share a mutual connection, try contacting this person to broker a warm introduction.

If you don't have a connection in common, you can establish relevancy by joining a LinkedIn Group the executive participates in. Make yourself a valued member of that community by engaging in the conversation.

Senior-level executives have a lot at stake with each professional relationship they form. Asking them to trust you won't cut it; that trust has to be earned. If you can establish your expertise, respect their time, and provide social proof, you're more likely to prove your worth and make that senior-level connection.

ASK THE EXPERT:

KEVIN THOMAS TULLY

VP of Marketing Enablement, Markistry

LI: How do sales pros benefit by thoroughly understanding the decision-making process?

KTT: Today's sales professional must possess an analytical mind with the ability to distinguish concrete and intangible buyer interactions, and synthesize this ever-changing information to distill positive process outcomes.

Because of the increasingly complex nature of the buying process, especially in B2B enterprise level sales, it is essential for sales professionals to identify and separate the multitude of factors affecting this process and to determine the degree to which they affect each other before a clear – and successful – buying decision can be made.

LI: What steps can a sales professional take to understand the buying process at their company?

KTT: Today's buyer is firmly in control of the buying process and is the primary driver of sales success.

An understanding of the buyer includes:

- **Identifying** key stakeholders and their roles (influencer, decision-maker, recommender);
- **Building** smart relationships (proper communication style); and
- **Understanding** buying intent (key issues, needs and priorities).

Research is a valuable component to buyer intelligence. The use of historical sales data, including established buyer personas and data-driven metrics (such as predictive analytics) to determine a buyer's actions, may shorten the buying process.

LI: How can sales pros use LinkedIn to accelerate the process of mapping the purchase journey?

KTT: The purchase journey has evolved from a linear, event-based funnel to a multi-touch buyer progression – from discovery to research to conversion – that is influenced in numerous ways on diverse digital sources.

The key to building an effective map lies in understanding how your buyers decide what to buy and how to buy. Savvy sales professionals use LinkedIn to build smart relationships by identifying the specific prospects with whom they want to connect and actively pursuing them.

Advanced sales tools, such as LinkedIn Sales Navigator, not only provide the ability to deliver contextually-relevant content that provides timely value to buyers and prospects, but also enable sales professionals to facilitate social listening and identify contextual cues and trigger events to move online conversations offline.

LI: How can understanding the buyer's journey generate more revenue?

KTT: Our goal as sales professionals is to influence buyer behavior by simultaneously creating value and building an integrity-based relationship. If you are unable to provide your buyer or prospect with the right tools, guides and information to assist him or her at the right time, and on his or her terms, you've lost your opportunity.

ACT TO CLOSE DEALS

Now that the groundwork has been set, let's talk about the final leg of the journey: how do salespeople ultimately influence buyers to close the deal? The answer lies in the number of people they engage (148% more than their peers) and the amount of content they use to engage them (23% more than peers). These statistics – based on primary research conducted by LinkedIn – correlate the behavior of reps that have exceeded quota to the way that they engaged buyers.

Relationship-driven sales professionals have identified more effective ways to influence the buying decision through the well-orchestrated delivery of content. Rather than inundating buyers with irrelevant collateral, the best companies are attuned to the specific information that various buying roles need at different stages of the buying process.

When you look for content to share with your prospects, focus on providing insights that will help them make more informed decisions about the challenges they face in their industry.

The content you share should include: relevant **industry news** to help your prospects stay up-to-date on their industry by sharing reports and relevant statistics.

Leverage industry data and news on LinkedIn by:

- Sharing links to interesting industry reports in your Status Updates; and
- Including data and statistics when commenting on prospects' Status Updates or in LinkedIn Group discussions.

One place to find articles to share is on LinkedIn Pulse, which features recent and top articles posted on the LinkedIn publishing platform. You can see articles posted by your network, as well as posts in categories ranging from Sales Strategies to Leadership & Management.

Watch the LinkedIn Sales Solutions blog for other ideas on how to engage your prospects with insights.

ASK THE EXPERT:

JACK KOSAKOWSKI

Head of Social Sales Disruption, Creation Agency

LI: How did you start using LinkedIn Insights to engage with sales?

JK: Using insights on LinkedIn has been huge for me. Leveraging data in real-time and being able to use it to add value to my buyer on a real-time basis from online conversation to offline close is huge. When my buyers create new content, get a new job, or even have a birthday, it is invaluable information for me to leverage.

I'm using these insights to get into conversations, keep the conversation going and tighten the relationship with my buyers. Using Insights is a crucial piece of touching the buyer before, during and after the sales process without asking them for something.

LI: Why is it important to engage the right decision-makers with compelling content?

JK: Buyers are on content overload today. A proper content strategy is the new competitive advantage when leveraging social in the sales process. Content is key for sales if you are looking to become valuable and visible to your buyers. Sales must be able to differentiate which content is value vs. noise and leverage that to their buyer's advantage.

Getting content into the right buyers' hands at the right time and with the right message is key to an efficient social selling process. Sales can shorten sales cycles, create more solid opportunities, and have more efficient conversations by doing so.

LI: What are three ways to influence the buying decision using LinkedIn?

JK: Influencing buyers on LinkedIn isn't an easy task, but it has a heavy upside if achieved. The No. 1 driver of influence on LinkedIn starts with making a commitment to content creation. The second way is to make a commitment to sharing buyer's content in strategic ways that add value to your buyer's day, career or personal life. No. 3 is actively listening to your buyers and engaging proactively to stay visible and valuable throughout the entire journey and sales process.

LI: How can engaging with LinkedIn Insights generate more revenue?

JK: With a strong social selling process infused into a strong traditional sales process, the upside is endless. Social data from LinkedIn allows sales reps to be better, more valuable and more efficient with buyers, helping sales reps standout. Used correctly, LinkedIn provides a competitive advantage that should be leveraged from online conversation to offline revenue to add massive value to the buyer.

SALES LEADERS

Inspire and Coach

INSPIRE AND COACH

People use to say, "it's not personal, it's business." But consumer technology has flipped that notion on its head. Amazon lets us know that we'll be out of shampoo next week and asks us if we'd like to buy more.

Google notices we're traveling to Boston tomorrow and suggests a few restaurants that we might enjoy. And Netflix has a knack for spotting programs that keep us up long past our bedtimes.

We love to do business with these companies because these companies have connected with us. They know what we like and how to deliver it. Nevermind the fact that these "connections" are actually the byproduct of massive data sets and the complicated analytics -- the experiences they deliver feel personal and that's what counts.

As a sales leader, it's your job to coach and encourage your team to have productive and relevant conversations with prospects. Using social networks such as LinkedIn gives you and your team access to the most up-to-date information available about the buyers you need to engage. More importantly, you have access to the tools to translate this information into the personalized sales experience buyers expect.

Since social will change how your sales team prospects and builds relationships, you'll need to think of how to get your sales pros on board. You'll have much better results if they dive in enthusiastically, than if you have to push them at every step.

The first step is to identify all the potential pain points that might prevent sales pros from throwing themselves into LinkedIn.

Ask these questions to identify roadblocks that can hinder social adoption by your sales reps:

- What pressures are sales reps under already?
- Are their prospects active on social?
- Will your sales reps face a technology barrier or social media learning curve?

Social Selling Value Proposition

Why use social media for sales?

- 90% of decision-makers never answer a cold call
- 75% of B2B buyers use social media in their decision-making process
- B2B Buyers are typically 57% of the way through their buying decision before they reach out to sales reps

Why LinkedIn?

- 49% of buyers research vendors through their LinkedIn profiles
- 44% of buyers find potential vendors through shared LinkedIn connections
- Sales pros that effectively use LinkedIn have 45% more opportunities per quarter and are 51% more likely to make quota than sales reps who do not effectively leverage LinkedIn

SALES LEADERS

Think about how you can "sell" social to your sales team so that they are excited to begin. The key is to present it as an activity that will help them get better results. A few questions your sales reps might have are:

- How will using social help us achieve our quotas?
- How will using social benefit the entire sales team?
- How should we get started using LinkedIn for sales?
- What support will we receive as we start using social for sales?

By communicating the value of using social to your team and helping them get started, you're setting up the foundation for them to have more personable and relevant conversations that will move the purchase decision forward.

TARGET RELEVANT BUYERS

With a growing number of influencers involved in the sales decision-making process, it can be tough for sales reps to identify who to target and at what point in the sales journey they should reach out. Typically, they start with a huge pool of potential candidates and use research, investigation, and deduction to narrow them down to the most likely prospects. But with LinkedIn, salespeople are now equipped to search for the individuals and companies that matter most to them in a more efficient, targeted way than ever before.

Our research found that **sales reps focused on new business who exceed quota make 148% more connection requests each month than other sales reps.** But it's not enough to urge your team to make new connections, they need to be connecting with high-potential prospects.

Help your sales team find the right people on LinkedIn by answering the following questions:

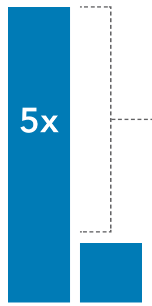
- What industries should your sales reps focus on?
- What regions are most important? (If your company has a geographic focus).
- What types and sizes of companies are prime targets?
- What job titles should sales reps focus on?

"Brands can keep analyzing data until they're blue in the face. However, if they don't know who really needs their product, all that fiddling with data will not help them stand out from the hundreds of competitors who are probably doing the same thing."

– Daniel Newman, Broadsuite Media Group

Then, have your team try the following tactics:

- **Create a qualified prospect pool with advanced search and saved leads.** Use LinkedIn's Advanced Search to zero in on the most promising potentials. If you have Sales Navigator, save leads to get customized recommendations.
- **Expand your network to enable warm introductions.** The more connections you have, the more you can use the "Get Introduced" feature to reach prospects. Make sure you connect with your co-workers in other departments, the members of your sales team, and people you meet at events. You can also use your existing client's connections to reverse-engineer introductions.
- **Establish commonalities with LinkedIn Groups.** LinkedIn Groups are a social selling secret weapon. If you are an active participant in a prospect's group, you have a baseline for establishing a relationship, and you have already begun to build trust and can position yourself as a helpful ally.



Buyers are **five times** more likely to engage with sales if they've come through LinkedIn Warm Introductions.

- **Capitalize on inbound interest.** Prospects who visit your LinkedIn profile are extending an invitation to engage with you – don't leave them hanging. Click the "X people viewed your profile in the last 15 days" notification on your feed to see who has been checking you out. Then use the opportunity to send a personalized connection request.

With the right know-how and tools, going from a huge list of potential leads to just a few qualified prospects becomes much simpler.

ASK THE EXPERT:

KOKA SEXTON

Content and Social Team, LinkedIn

LI: Why are the best salespeople adopting the strategy of spending less time actually selling to customers and more time on researching them?

KS: Instead of trying to force the sale on buyers that may not be ready or have a need or desire, the best salespeople are spending a larger portion of time looking for the ideal buyer that is already in a position to make a purchase. This is done by watching for obvious buying signals or even passively discussing topics around your product.

LI: How did you start understanding the buyer's journey for sales?

KS: My story goes back many years. I was having a really hard time with the typical sales process, because it was becoming more and more difficult to get customers. So I decided to take a break from selling and pay closer attention to how people in my network were engaging about new products or services that were of interest.

This is ultimately what sent me on the trajectory of social selling; people were leveraging their networks and social media to become self educated before ever talking to someone in sales. I decided to start injecting information into the conversations already taking place about the product or market that I was selling into.

The short answer is that I put myself into the shoes of the customer and adopted their process and just found ways to add value to it.

LI: How can sales leaders use LinkedIn to thoroughly understand the decision-making process?

KS: The best way to understand something is to find ways to measure it. If sales managers want to understand the decision-making process with LinkedIn, they must build ways to measure the activities that the sales teams are using. From building their network, to measuring the engagements of the reps' status updates and ultimately how leads are attributed in the CRM, these are the new waterfall metrics that sales leaders should pay attention to.

LI: How can understanding the buyer's journey generate more revenue?

KS: Buyers can find their way to your website or landing pages in hundreds of different ways, but identifying the common paths taken and then optimizing the conversions from those paths is where success is found. Once you are able to decrease friction and open up the funnel for the right leads, you can create a predictable revenue stream.

UNDERSTAND THE BUYING PROCESS

According to CEB, the average B2B purchase involves more than five decision-makers. For sales pros, this means "getting to power" is no longer enough. People constantly change jobs and titles, and new people can be brought into decisions without notice. This means that, now more than ever, relying on a single relationship can be dangerous, especially when the parameters of a deal can change in the blink of an eye.

As a sales leader, it's your job to help your sales team mitigate this risk by identifying the key decision-makers – the buying committee – and building relationships with each of them. Here are a few tips to help your sales reps understand the buying process:

Use LinkedIn to find the right people

Naturally enough, the first step to connecting with an account's buying committee is finding out who the decision-makers are. You can use Advanced Search to discover people with specific job titles within the organization and set up alerts for when someone changes jobs or gets hired into a decision-making position.

Determining your best path for connecting

Once you find the right people to contact, be strategic about making a connection. According to a LinkedIn survey, **more than half of buyers will reject a cold connection outright.** If you can leverage your network to broker an introduction, your communication is more likely to be welcomed.

58%

58% of reps who exceeded their research expectations had lead conversion rates of more than 50%.

–*Sales Performance Optimization Study*, CSO Insights

Start with your first-degree connections. If someone at the account is already in your network, they may be willing to introduce you. If not, use LinkedIn's "How you're connected" feature to see who else in your network can provide that introduction.

Before reaching out to make the connection, scan the prospect's profile for shared interests, hobbies, or any other commonalities you can use in your outreach. One easy way to establish a common bond is through your activity on LinkedIn Groups.

Cater to individual needs and motivations

Each member of the executive staff has their own stakes, goals, and priorities to address. You stand a better chance of proving your relevance if you can tailor your approach to each person's job title and duties.

Having your sales reps get to know the buying committee ensures they have a relationship with key decision-makers who will ultimately move the sale forward.

ASK THE EXPERT:

MATT HEINZ

President, Heinz Marketing

LI: Why should companies target buyers based on interest and intent?

MH: You're not going to close deals very often if the buyer doesn't have interest, but the addition of "intent" implies that the buyer is motivated to act. Indications of both interest and intent can be explicit or subtle, related to your product/service or the problem/pain it is solving. We all want prospects who want our product or service, but the more interesting interest/intent signals are based on inherent needs, core problems, trigger events that imply – again, subtly or directly – that the prospect is ready to engage.

LI: How did you start using data-driven segmentation to target the right buyers?

MH: It starts with knowing who your target prospects are – what specific companies, in what industries, what specific roles or titles or decision-makers are you targeting. But then you apply a layer of psychographic information. What's going on in their company, when did they get a new boss or new CEO or new competitor, etc. We've been targeting the right companies/individuals for a long time, but in the past couple years we've been focused on distinct buying signals and trigger events, as well. Our engagement and differentiation have gone through the roof.

LI: What are three tips for targeting the right buyers on LinkedIn?

MH: One, build relationships before you need them. Get to know people and engage with them on their terms, without pretense.

Two, use Sales Navigator to build lists, get alerts to new buying signals and gain insights into who else in your organization has insights or relationships with your target prospects.

Three, go outside of LinkedIn to engage those prospects and buyers, as well. LinkedIn has some excellent engagement tools, but you'll be most effective if you use insights from LinkedIn to pick up the phone, engage via other social channels and inform your in-person conversations.

LI: How can targeting the right buyers generate more revenue?

MH: By targeting the right buyers, you save money, save time, drive greater efficiency from your existing resources and hit your number faster, in less time, and with higher margin. Targeting means more revenue per action, more pipeline from your sales reps and better response to your marketing campaigns. You can get there by spamming the world too, but the collateral damage will kill your brand, and it simply does not scale if you want a sustainable, long-term business.

ACT TO CLOSE DEALS

Let's assume at this point your sales reps have started their social selling efforts. They have optimized their profile, strategically expanded their network, and know how and where to find potential prospects. Now it's time to engage their prospects with relevant and timely content.

By sharing the right content at the right time, you can quickly establish yourself as a credible ally who will add value throughout the decision-making journey. The CMO Council reports that **decision-makers consume five pieces of content before reaching a decision**, so it's best to have your sales reps sharing as early in the relationship as you can.

As a sales leader, your role is to strengthen the connection between the sales reps and your company's marketing team so that your sales reps have the resources they need to engage their prospects with relevant insights.

To identify the resources your sales reps need to build relationships with prospects, ask sales reps:

- What questions do your buyers continuously ask you?
- What types of content gets the best results when you reach out to prospects?
- What industry insights do you share with your prospects?

Then, work with your marketing team to identify:

- What kind of content can we create to answer commonly-asked buyer questions?
- How can we make it easier for sales reps to reach out with industry insights?
- How can we extract and use the expertise of our internal experts?

The right content shared at the right time can help turn a lead into a prospect and a prospect into a customer. Stick with visually strong, easy-to-digest content for the top of the funnel. Introduce heavier, data-driven content mid-funnel, and follow up with personalized solutions for your lower-funnel prospects. Then you can nurture your relationships with customers by sharing assets that help them get the most from you and your solutions.

Effective content for each sales stage:

Awareness. Share short content with a strong visual component. Infographics and blog posts are a perfect fit for this stage.

Education. Share your company's white papers or other industry reports that make a solid case for your relevance. Webinars are also a good way to showcase the industry conversation around your solutions.

Consideration. Share case studies that focus on specific solutions that speak directly to their needs. The more relevant they are to the prospect's current pain points, the better.

ASK THE EXPERT:

JIM KEENAN

CEO/President, A Sales Guy

LI: How did you start engaging with prospects using insights?

JK: Insights about individuals, as well as companies, are important to the sales process. Over the years we've discovered that it is more productive for the sales team to engage with 50 of the right people rather than connect with 100 people who aren't likely to close.

It is really a matter of looking at ways to improve your close rate by knowing more about the prospects in your pipeline.

LI: Why is it important to engage the right decision-makers with compelling content?

JK: The first step is to find the right decision-maker. If you have the perfect piece of content, but share it with the wrong person, you aren't going to get very far. When you share the right content with the right person, you go from being a salesperson just pushing a product to being an influencer who is there to help them improve their business and help them get their job done more effectively.

The best salespeople influence the buying process by solving real problems, even if the prospect doesn't yet know that the problem exists. Sharing the right information with the right person is critical in getting them to give you a few minutes of their time.

LI: What are three ways to influence the buying decision using LinkedIn?

JK: The first way to influence the buying process is to share something with the prospect that they may not know – an article about an industry trend or a thought leadership piece about an issue affecting the industry.

Another way to influence the buying decision is to uncover a process that is broken or a methodology that isn't working. You can gain a prospect's trust by opening their eyes to problems or issues that are impeding success.

The third way to influence a buying decision is to highlight opportunities that the prospect didn't know existed.

LI: How can engaging with insights generate more revenue?

JK: Engaging with prospects using insights is more efficient and increases close rates. Without insights, you end up bringing the wrong information to the wrong people.

Insights also increase the effectiveness of the sales cycle. When you're spending more time reaching out to the right people, you're more likely to have productive conversations with the right people that result in deals.

MARKETING LEADERS

Engage Prospects with Relevant Content

ENGAGE PROSPECTS WITH RELEVANT CONTENT

We all know that marketing and sales teams should be aligned by now, but did you know that lack of cohesion between the departments costs B2B organizations at least **10% of revenue per year?**

With such obvious benefits, why do so many companies still struggle with collaboration? At many organizations, the issue is historic: The two groups have not coexisted comfortably, and past struggles may contribute to contemporary dysfunction in working relationships.

As a marketer, it is in your best interests to collaborate with sales on marketing initiatives. So why not be the person who inspires meaningful change? Here are three ways you can take the lead in transforming the marketing and sales relationship at your company:

Understanding your organization's sales methodology

One of the best ways to ensure you meet the expectations of the sales team is to proactively reach out to learn their social selling objectives. Ask sales leaders and sales reps what they are looking to accomplish and the methods they use to reach out to prospects. By making sure that you're on the same page, you'll make sure that there's clear alignment between your marketing initiatives and the goals of the sales team.

Identifying when to transition leads from marketing to sales

Research from IDC reveals that **75% of buyers are using social media to research solutions,** and it's becoming less clear when marketing should hand leads off to sales. When leads are passed along too early, prospects might not feel that their needs are being met, and sales reps might get restless because leads are not ready to buy.

57%

57% of a typical purchase decision is made before a customer even talks to a salesperson.

–*The Digital Evolution In B2B Marketing*, CEB, CSO Insights

MARKETING LEADERS

Consider working with your organization's sales leaders to put together a service level agreement that specifies when marketing passes leads on to sales, how qualified leads will be followed up on, and when sales should pass leads back to marketing for further nurturing.

Align your KPIs with sales

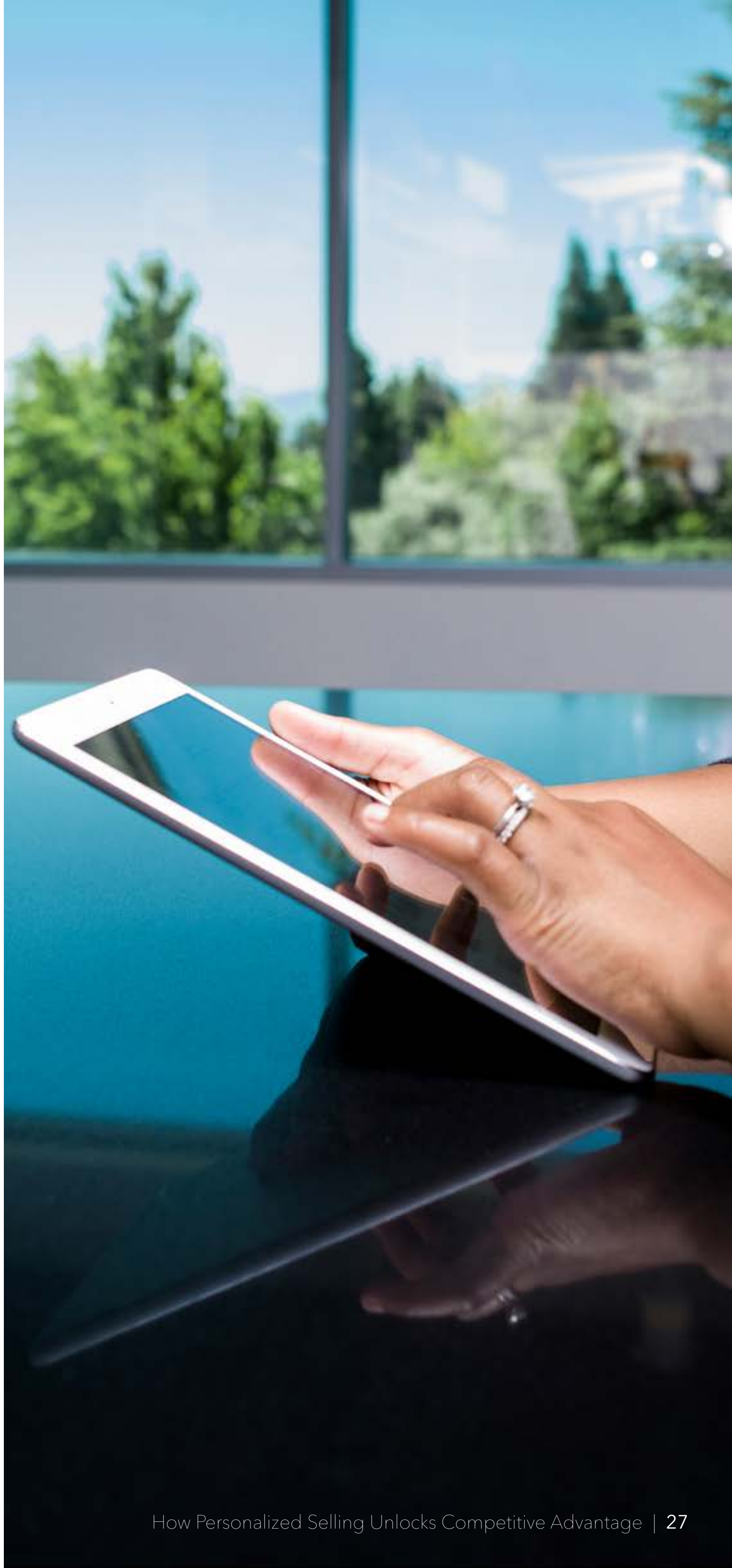
Start off by making sure that both sales and marketing have the same objectives. Connect with your sales teams and sales leaders to discuss:

- What questions do buyers have as they move forward in the decision-making process?
- What content is the most impactful at each stage of the buying process?
- How can you work with sales reps and sales leaders to develop relevant content?

Once sales and marketing are on the same page, you'll need to help your sales team understand how to amplify your marketing messages to the right people and provide outreach for your company.

When you create content, think about:

- What "trigger events" should alert sales reps that it's time to send a particular piece of content?
- What buyer questions does each piece of content answer?
- What marketing or thought leadership content can sales reps send to prospects to initiate conversations?
- How should sales reps leverage each piece of content to amplify their own thought leadership?



TARGET RELEVANT BUYERS

While sales reps will reach out to individual prospects, as a marketer you should focus on attracting your ideal buyer to your company.

Here are two ways you can help your sales reps find the right people on LinkedIn:

Develop buyer personas

Help your organization's sales reps better understand their prospects by creating buyer personas for their ideal buyers. The Advanced People Search tool on LinkedIn can help you view the profiles of prospects in your key industries. You can also refer to LinkedIn Groups to identify the concerns of buyers at different stages of the buying cycle.

As you develop Buyer Personas, you'll likely learn about how each group interacts on LinkedIn. Pass that information on to your sales reps so they know the best way to reach out to each prospect.

Explore LinkedIn Groups

LinkedIn Groups help sales reps show off their knowledge and connect with their prospects. Help your sales reps find out how to connect with their prospects on LinkedIn by scoping out your competitors to see where their marketers and sales team representatives are interacting on LinkedIn. Most likely, the communities they are engaged with will also contain your prospects.

ASK THE EXPERT:

LEE ODDEN

CEO TopRank Online Marketing

LI: How did you start using data-driven segmentation to target the right buyers?

LO: At some point, every company that evolves in their marketing maturity develops a refined approach to customer targeting. Early on, marketing to a generic set of buyer characteristics is where many companies focus their effort. But as competition from other solutions rises and competition for buyer attention increases, companies must become more personalized and specific in their offers. The only way to do that effectively is through data-driven segmentation.

Our experience at first was to make a number of assumptions about our target audience: who they were, what their goals were and what they cared about. Results were hit or miss, and when the effectiveness of that approach started to fade, we began using data insights to identify key opportunities to better attract, engage and convert buyers. We identified three categories of opportunity for content targeting: discovery, consumption and action.

LI: Why should companies target buyers based on interest and intent?

LO: Interests can be transient, but intent leads to a specific action. Marketing is all about attracting, engaging and inspiring action amongst buyers and to do that effectively. Companies should target buyers based on both interest and intent. A buyer may be interested in your category of solution as part of their professional pursuits, but unless there is intent to evaluate or purchase, targeting on interest alone can be a waste.

LI: What are three tips for targeting the right buyers on LinkedIn?

LO:

1. Target the right audience for the right reasons – a little empathy goes a long way.
2. Focus on relevance and personalize your outreach. Create value by being useful in a way that leads the buyer to the logical conclusion that you are the right solution.
3. Monitor your efforts, collect data and optimize performance.

LI: How can targeting the right buyers generate more revenue?

LO: Effective customer targeting presents offers that are more relevant to the buyer and more closely aligned with solving their pain. More relevant engagement at the right time will result in a waterfall effect of more interactions, discussions, leads and booked deals.

There are other benefits from effective customer targeting that create financial benefits for companies, such as shortening sales cycles, increasing order volume and order frequency, as well as inspiring more referrals.

UNDERSTAND THE BUYING PROCESS

As marketing has evolved in the digital era, one of the most frequently heard axioms is "content is king," and if a kingdom ever had a queen, "context" would rule right alongside content. Content without context does not create additional value, neither for sales professionals nor for potential advisors. Personalized, relevant content is the key to catching the attention of B2B buyers today. Consider the following activities in your marketing approach:

Target specific selling situations along the buyer's journey

Figure out where your prospects are in the sales lifecycle and tailor content to the specific stage. Create content by either:

- Modifying your value proposition message to "why change?" or
- Modifying your value proposition message to "why are you the best choice?"

Research where your prospects are in the sales cycle and leverage social networks to your advantage.

Understand and align to specific buyer roles

Understand the roles of relevant decision-makers and tailor your content to the pain points and different needs of each individual. The easiest way to do this is to create a matrix of your stakeholders and map their level and role within the organization. This will help you define different perspectives and patterns to help you tailor both context and content.

Use vertical color and language

In other words, being able to clearly demonstrate an understanding of your business challenges and articulate potential solutions. In fact, **only 13% of executive buyers believe that salespeople can effectively achieve this.** Ideally, you want to understand these three areas: your business, your customer's business, and the intersection of the two – and how it will benefit the customer.

By focusing on all three steps you should be able to tailor your content for greater impact and relevance, and transform your interactions from push to pull.

25%

The best sales reps spend up to 25% more time researching these issues before they ever engage the buyer.

–Harvard Business Review

ASK THE EXPERT:

MICHAEL BRITO

Head of Social Marketing, W2O Group

LI: Why are the best salespeople spending less time actually selling to customers and more time on researching them?

MB: Customers have passions and interests outside of what they do 9 to 5. This intelligence is critical for salespeople to understand because it allows them to facilitate a conversation in a way that's relatable and relevant to potential customers. There is also a level of humanity with this approach because people relate to other people.

LI: How did you start understanding the buyer's journey for sales?

MB: The great thing about social data is that it allows you to understand the customer journey based on conversations and behavioral data. Anyone who uses social media leaves breadcrumbs of data every day. Couple that with search data, and it's easy to identify where a target customer is within the sales cycle.

LI: How can sales leaders use LinkedIn to thoroughly understand the decision-making process?

MB: There are a lot of ways to leverage LinkedIn's tools to gather intelligence on prospects. Although the insights are qualitative in nature, the intelligence is still valuable. Here are a few ways:

- **Participation in Groups:** LinkedIn Groups are still a great way to listen and engage. The important thing to remember about LinkedIn, and Groups specifically, is that participation must be authentic.
- **Thought Leadership:** LinkedIn's Publishing Platform is a way to not only demonstrate thought leadership, but it can also be used to facilitate discussions with customers. The angle and narrative are important here, so sales folks must be transparent when trying to understand their prospects' decision-making process.

LI: How can understanding the buyer's journey generate more revenue?

MB: If you know what your customers are saying and how they are behaving online, it's very easy to reach them with highly targeted content to facilitate their way down the purchase funnel. Here are a few examples:

- **Search:** Knowing what your customers are searching for during their decision-making process will allow you to bid on the right keywords at the right time.
- **Social:** Targeting in social media has become extremely sophisticated over the past year. With a custom audience architecture, it's easy to target specific people with relevant messages.
- **Employee Advocacy:** This is a huge opportunity for brands, large and small, to mobilize their employees to participate in industry conversations. Doing so will allow executives, subject matter experts and salespeople to influence their peers and, at the end of the day, drive sales.

ACT TO CLOSE DEALS

Getting the right content to the right person at the right time with a relevant, personal touch is what separates the savvy content creators and sharers from the rest of the pack. Most buyers can easily ignore generic marketing messages, but LinkedIn research found that **64% of B2B buyers like being contacted with relevant information for their business.**

Here are some ways to engage buyers with personalized content through LinkedIn:

- Use InMail Campaigns or Sponsored Updates to send industry insights to your prospects. These efforts can be aimed directly at professionals who best fit your buyer personas.
- Add Calls to Action on your LinkedIn profile and your organization's Company Page to drive visiting LinkedIn members to destination URLs.
- Post eBooks, white papers, webinars and series of posts on your organization's Company Page to help prospects build their professional skills or solve a business challenge.
- Provide insightful feedback to questions in LinkedIn Groups or respond to comments on your LinkedIn Feed. Make sure your educational content outnumbers any news releases and demos.

Help your sales team share content appropriately by:

- Explaining when and how each type of content can and should be used. This will increase the ROI of your content marketing, along with your sales team's effectiveness.
- Training reps to effectively engage with their LinkedIn feeds (liking, sharing, commenting, etc.). Help them see firsthand how performing these activities can lead to a boost in awareness and credibility.
- Highlighting great examples. When you see quality sharing and comments, take screenshots so the rest of your team has models to follow.

ASK THE EXPERT:

JUSTIN SHRIBER

Justin Shriber, Head of Marketing, LinkedIn Sales Solutions

LI: How did you start engaging with Insights for Sales?

JS: As we navigate the digital world, we're constantly sending out signals that reflect who we are, what we value and how we operate. Consumer technologies, such as Netflix and Amazon, have made a science out of translating these signals into personalized experiences that build intense loyalty. These signals can be put to work in a B2B context to engender the same kind of loyalty between a buyer and seller.

Marketers are key to making this happen. They identify the signals that matter and provide reps with the playbook on how to respond. At LinkedIn, we've tried to make that easy by proactively flagging insights that reflect intent to buy, as when a prospect moves into a new role.

LI: What are the benefits of engaging the right decision-makers with compelling content?

JS: LinkedIn conducted an interesting study in which we examined the correlation between sales performance and content. We found that top-performing sales reps deliver 25% more content to decision-makers than their less successful reps.

Digging deeper, we also found that the best reps also put more thought into the content they deliver.

LI: What are three ways to influence the buying decision using LinkedIn?

JS: Influencing the buying decision starts with understanding the buying process. Individual buyers often don't understand the full process and, if they do, they may not disclose it. LinkedIn enables a sales pro to identify people in their network who can provide a perspective on the buying process without being directly involved – former employees or colleagues of decision-makers.

LinkedIn also facilitates warm introductions to key members of the buying process by flagging mutual connections and through InMail, a personal way to reach out to a target prospect.

Lastly, sales pros can create massive value for buyers by delivering great content at strategic moments in the buying process, as LinkedIn's Elevate product allows companies to easily assemble a library of materials that reps can browse and deploy.

LI: How can engaging with LinkedIn Insights generate more revenue?

JS: Buyers naturally gravitate to sales pros who are dialed into the digital signals they're sending. When reps wait until prospects show intent to buy, when they take time to map the buying process and build a strategy to address the needs of each member of the buying team, and when they build credibility by engaging via warm intros and thoughtful content, it's not surprising that they close more deals of greater value in a shorter amount of time.

CONCLUSION

It's an ever-changing landscape for sales and marketing professionals. Prospective customers already expect companies to establish credibility, make a personal connection and engage them only when they have a relevant context for their outreach. While the process of sales may always involve face-to-face education and persuasion, many elements of prospecting, relationship-building and adding value can be greatly aided through the consistent use of social networks. That's why platforms such as LinkedIn and tools like Sales Navigator have become essential.

The near future is about targeting buyers who want to talk to you and are ready to buy. It's about understanding buyers and being ready to advise them before you engage. And it's about providing sustained value by anticipating and delivering on their needs.

Whether you're a sales rep, sales leader or marketer, you can stand out from the competition by creating the personalized sales experience buyers demand and deserve. The key is to be both strategic and personable with your selling, and by following the steps in this guide, you and your team can do just that.