

# Speak With Your Customers

*Sometimes you  
need more than  
CRM automation.*

By Neil Sikder - Posted  
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Automation. Efficiency. Sales growth. That is what best-of-breed CRM technologies provide and if implemented in support of the right strategy and surrounded by the right processes and people, it works beautifully. No one can argue that.

However, in this age where technology drives automation, standardization and efficiency, we often overlook very basic and often manual efforts to learn how to sell our products and services to our customers. The most ancient of practices -- and sometimes the most effective -- is to speak with your customers.

It's simple: Engage. Inquire. Listen.

Despite its simplicity, businesses often overlook this critical process to support the development of their strategy and their specific sales and marketing practices. Sales, marketing, product development and strategy development professionals must regularly incorporate customer research to get the most out of existing customer relationships and to find new customers.

No CRM solution can answer the following basic questions without a human doing the legwork:

- Who is the final decision-maker for the product/service purchase in a specific account?
- What is the decision-making process within the account? Who is involved and what role does each individual play?
- What is the perception of your company vs. competitors?
- What are your customers' most pressing requirements and how can your solution be positioned to resonate best with customers? Why did you win/lose your previous customer contract opportunities?
- Who are the right customers to target and with what message? (Okay, there are plenty of CRM tools that can help with this last question)

Answers to these questions can help your organization align sales and marketing resources, set the course for a new strategy and drive future product development efforts.

On an ad-hoc, casual basis, this customer engagement must be ingrained into any business and can be managed internally, but sometimes it makes sense to use third-party research and consulting firms. These firms can relieve internal human capital constraints, bring a fresh perspective, provide customer analysis expertise, and often act as an independent third-party that receives and communicates back to you honest feedback from your customers. In other words, a customer that is engaged by a third-party might be more inclined to provide candid feedback on your organization and your competitors more so than if your own account manager is sitting across the table from her. Your customers let their guard down a bit.

In a business-to-business environment, the way to go with your customer research is quality over quantity. Static and rigid surveys do not get to the level of detail and insight you need. Having twenty hour-long open-ended conversations with your customers is often more revealing than a 500 participant survey where customers spend 10 minutes providing pre-determined answers to pre-determined questions. You will be surprised at the things you can learn by having valuable conversations with twenty or so customers. Ideas,

thoughts and themes that you have never considered “bubble up to the surface” and force you to think about your business differently.

In a business-to-consumer setting, surveys can work, but focus groups are a great tool as well. Focus groups permit open-ended dialogue that provides very rich information you can really chew on.

The evolution of CRM tools has done wonders for driving sales growth, but companies really need to put forth a formal effort to listen to their customers and truly understand what they are saying. This helps set the strategy, develop the message/value proposition and prioritizes how sales and marketing resources should be applied. CRM tools can then be used to execute.

**About the author**

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