

The Inside-Outside Alliance: How Inside and Field Sales Teams Collaborate to Maximize Growth

By Britton Manasco and Anneke Seley

There is an upside to be realized when inside and outside reps collaborate. Whether they are working together as “openers and closers” or collaborating as a team to sell into and grow accounts and markets, inside salespeople and field or partner salespeople have much to offer each other. Winning companies will commit themselves to exploring these angles, and adopt structures that are appropriate to their business models. This article covers a strategy we call “the Inside-Outside Alliance” and takes the reader through risks, opportunities and examples of how companies are implementing a team selling model.

Too often, inside and outside sales teams operate in separate worlds, uninformed by the experiences of the other. But when they operate in silos, they miss the opportunities associated with synergy. They miss the chance to realize scale efficiencies or fully capitalize on their respective strengths. But this need not happen to you. By putting the right sales strategies in place, you enter the vanguard of Next Era Selling.

Trending Now: Sales Development

Sales efficiency problems are an extreme headache for many companies. In an era of escalating customer demands, heightened competition and excessive sales costs threaten the success of the enterprise. The leading indicators that matter most include factors such as selling time, pipeline volume and velocity, and sales cycle length. Sometimes, there’s a mismatch between customer acquisition cost and customer lifetime value. You want to address concerns around these indicators in order to deliver and sustain impressive sales performance.

While insurgent companies in Silicon Valley and elsewhere seem to be aggressively adopting this approach, many incumbent organizations have been far less assertive on this front. Even many young companies have struggled to put in place the structures and systems necessary to thrive on this practice.

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Companies that treat their sales forces in a traditional way tend to leave territorial reps on their own to build their own territories. They rely on lagging indicators, such as revenue performance and quota attainment, to measure the effectiveness of their reps.

Some don’t actively monitor leading indicators, including the factors that create a strong pipeline, in relation to outcomes in the field. As a result, they have little ability to influence outcomes on a day-to-day basis. Too often, unqualified leads are handed off to sales. And too often, field reps are responsible for a large proportion of their own prospecting efforts.

Taking a New Direction

The implications are troubling. At a high level, sales inefficiencies mean companies are vulnerable to disruption by nimble competitors. You can’t generate enough new leads and opportunities when you have no rigorous approach to outbound outreach. You can’t fill sales pipelines when you have no systematic means of generating and nurturing leads. You are likely to suffer poor conversion ratios from lead to opportunity when you don’t have an adequate means of qualifying prospects and moving them forward.

Ultimately, performance ratios, particularly revenue to sales expense, become deeply problematic when your company clings to outdated approaches to lead generation and pipeline development. You are unable to expand coverage areas or efficiently target new markets. By failing to free up your most highly compensated reps to pursue high-value deals with full focus, you can undermine growth at every turn.

Standing Still: Implications and Consequences

When your company underinvests or fails to invest in advanced approaches to sales development, you magnify the misalignment that's all too common in sales and marketing efforts. Misalignment manifests itself in three key ways: misallocated talent, process inadequacies; and low conversion rates. Consider these one by one:

1. **Misallocated talent:** Few would debate the proposition that it makes no sense to tie up highly paid professionals in work that is unmatched to their skill sets. Yet sales organizations do it all the time with field sales personnel. They are often expected to spend a lot of time prospecting in order to help build their own pipelines. While a certain amount of prospecting is certainly sensible, the question is: How much?

According to Vorsight, a sales training and demand generation firm, it can take 60–90 dials to set an appointment. How does that break down? It takes 12.73 dials to complete a call when a list includes direct phone numbers (18.83 dials when the list is based on switchboard numbers). It takes 22.5 dials to have a meaningful conversation (and sometimes as many as 30 when reaching out to prospects in highly solicited roles). Finally, it takes three meaningful conversations to get a single appointment.

2. **Process inadequacies:** While the dialing activity associated with lead development is certainly difficult to execute, the challenge of generating and nurturing leads is made still harder by other digital demands. To set an appointment or qualify a prospect, you frequently have to combine phone outreach with digital interactions, including email and social media touches. This multichannel factor, then, is one more reason sales reps are poorly equipped to build their own pipelines. It takes time, attention, and a stable workspace to handle this heavy volume of communication activity. You have to manage not only a large number of outbound touches, but also a diverse mix of them.

It also takes persistence. You have to follow up actively and regularly to get your prospects on the phone. Random acts don't work. Nor does insufficient follow up. In many cases, prospects are more than willing to have a conversation. They are simply unavailable at

any given time. So, it takes more effort to make a live connection or identify a time when a conversation can take place.

Yet another factor is the issue of response time. Industry research suggests that the likelihood of converting a lead to an opportunity falls precipitously as time elapses. "If a company attempts phone contact within 5 minutes after lead submission, the odds that the lead is contacted are 100 times greater than if it is contacted 30 minutes after submission," according to research from InsideSales.com.

3. **Low conversion rates:** It's one thing to execute the actions necessary to connect and converse with a prospect. It's still another to ensure a conversation is clarifying and qualifying. But leads and prospects must be qualified to achieve high conversions from lead to opportunity.

Failure occurs when marketing hands off unqualified leads to sales reps. That puts the onus on the rep to determine if the lead is genuine. In such cases, it's common for sales reps to simply ignore the leads. It's also common for them to spend a huge amount of time and energy engaged in their own efforts to qualify the leads. Both actions are inefficient.

Strategic Results through Collaboration

Up against these concerns and challenges, companies are now actively committing themselves to a sales development solution—a key element in the success strategy we refer to as the Inside–Outside Alliance. You might have inside reps generating leads and appointments for field reps, account-focused reps or even channel partners. Of course, you can also have sales development reps generating leads for quota-carrying inside sales reps—an increasingly common scenario.

For this strategy, the key factor in the mix is active and rigorous collaboration between inside and outside selling groups. In this case, the sales development organization focuses on enabling the field selling team to perform with far greater focus and effectiveness. By taking on responsibilities for lead generation, lead nurturing, lead qualification, and appointment setting, sales development reps (SDRs) play a powerful role in opportunity and pipeline development.

To get there, you have to fund and build a sales development organization. You have to cultivate a cadre of inbound and outreach specialists. Their success involves a mix of activity and acumen. SDR teams need not be highly advanced in terms of overall work experience. It's common to have teams made up of young professionals with varying levels of collegiate achievement. What's most important is energy and enthusiasm, work ethic and professional drive.

They also need to be aggressive learners. They will be learning on the job, accumulating skills in customer communication, data and tool management, team collaboration, and time management. They must value and act on performance feedback. In many cases, their actions will be closely monitored, and their outcomes will be carefully tracked.

Pursuing Opportunities as a Team

While some reps will be in inbound roles (responding to the actions and requests of prospects), others will be in outbound roles, actively reaching out to prospects that fit certain criteria. They will also be responsible for nurturing leads and following up with prospects to produce opportunities.



Source: Visible Impact and Reality Works Group

Ralph Barsi, who leads the global demand center at ServiceNow, notes the most significant source of sales collaboration in many firms involves “openers” and “closers.” As he explains, the openers “schedule meetings with key folks that fit our ideal customer profile. They get the conversation started, and they get the company’s foot in the doors of prospective accounts that we’ve got our eyes on.” It’s up to field sales reps, or account executives, to carry the deal forward and close it.

Outbound prospecting remains critical in this era—even as some marketing gurus claim that buyers can manage their own journeys. “You don’t always have the privilege or the luxury of an inbound inquiry,” Barsi adds. “Instead, you’re knocking on the doors of prospective accounts, saying: ‘We’ve learned quite a bit about you. We’ve been researching you. Based on the intelligence we have gathered, we think it might make sense to introduce ourselves at this point and see if you agree that it makes sense to start a discussion.’”

The approach works because there’s a division of labor—a commitment to specialization. In the case of high-impact, complex deals, there’s a significant amount of focused activity that needs to happen in order to initially qualify an opportunity and get meetings with key members of a decision team. And then, there’s a lot of focused activity that’s required once the opportunity is in play. You need specialization to win the deal. But you first need collaboration—an Inside–Outside Alliance—to make the deal possible.

Expanding through a Teaming Model

The Inside–Outside Alliance gives you additional opportunities and possibilities. Some organizations have created special teams designed to collaboratively work specific territories related to geography, product or industry. In these cases, quota carrying inside sales reps might team up with quota-carrying field reps to hit a specified revenue target.

Research from the AA-ISP recognizes a “teaming model” that brings a host of benefits: heightened collaboration, deeper product knowledge, and enhanced customer or market expertise. But challenges are sometimes associated with this approach, too. Among them: lack of accountability, lack of recognition, inconsistency among territories and difficulties measuring ROI.

In some companies, deals are switched from rep to rep depending on who makes the most sense to work the deal. In the best-functioning teams, the field team is freed up to chase large, unlimited deals, while their counterparts in inside sales ensure the existing customer base and the market coverage area is properly worked.



Gary Smyth, who has led inside sales teams for Oracle and now runs an Austin based consulting firm called Sales Elite, discusses several of the dynamics in play in today's inside–outside partnerships.

“For sales organizations that have more of a focus on acquiring net new customers, it is not unusual to see territories structured based on geography as well as a prospect's annual revenue,” he notes. “A territory may be composed of a state / large metropolitan area and prospects under a certain revenue band such as \$100 million. The field sales rep would have a dual role: operating as the field sales rep located in-territory and also the manager of an inside sales team. The field sales rep would then own and be compensated on the quota for the entire region, with each inside sales rep owning and being compensated for his or her own percentage of the overall quota.”

Smyth contends it's essential to have a “structured engagement model” that facilitates collaboration between inside and outside reps. For instance, the model might include weekly meetings tied to measurable activities, quarterly “hub visits” that bring the inside and field teams together, and constant business reviews.

With a focus on professional development and building the brand for inside sales within an organization, “an inside sales showcase” can be a good tactic to build awareness of inside sales, strengths and leadership with a predominantly outside sales environment, Smyth adds. Senior field executives would spend the day with their respective inside counterparts to learn about go-to-market strategy and tools/ technologies being leveraged. Benefits include a unified territory plan, additional career opportunities for the inside sales teams, and improved communication.

To avoid channel conflict and maximize territory coverage, opportunity thresholds by dollar value can be put into place, he says. The inside sales team, for instance, might focus on opportunity sizes of less than \$100K in net new markets, and the outside sales team would focus on opportunities of more than \$100K. Opportunities can then be reviewed on a deal-by-deal basis if they fall outside the guidelines. Some reasons for making exceptions: a customer satisfaction challenge or a requirement to be on-site to troubleshoot

product issues. “For larger, enterprise-type accounts, a successful approach to territory management can be the field sales team focusing on the parent entity, while the inside sales team focuses on mergers, acquisitions, divestitures or subsidiaries of that parent account,” Smyth says.

Who's the Quarterback?

Still another possibility revolves around a reversal in terms of who is quarterbacking deals. While field salespeople conventionally have taken the lead in terms of deal and client ownership, it's increasingly plausible that inside reps might begin to take the lead. After all, the inside reps may have access to a much richer assortment of information and a much better workflow in terms of managing it. The inside rep, thus, has a much better vantage for strategic client management. You could even imagine the inside sales specialists dispatching the field sales professional (or product specialist, sales consultant, or local partner) to build trust and provide face-to-face support as necessary. The inside person would, in this case, play the role of client lead and deserve to be compensated as such.

Contrary to the high-volume approaches associated with much of sales development today, you can expect to see account-driven approaches that require inside and outside sales specialists, as well as account-focused marketers, to work together to make big accounts even bigger.

Capitalizing on the Inside–Outside Alliance

ADP, a market leader in payroll and human resource management solutions, has deployed the team model in multiple ways. While quota-carrying, inside sales reps have discrete territories in some cases, they collaborate within territories in other cases.

“We have a wide variety of programs,” says Liz Gelb-O'Connor, a senior ADP leader who has overseen inside sales strategy and social selling. “We found that, in some cases, a team model is one of the best models. We work in tandem as a team within large accounts, and then divide and conquer, and basically extend our activities and appear to be more coordinated in the eyes of our clients.”



Team arrangements sometimes involve inside reps selling different products from their outside counterparts within the same accounts. “Rather than having our field partners getting bogged down in smaller sales, the inside sales team frees them up to pursue more complex deals. That’s a key focus for us in the upper end of the market. They figure out a rhythm among themselves and do account plans together to meet their objectives,” Gelb-O’Connor says.

This level of camaraderie was established within the past 3–4 years, which went a long way in resolving channel conflict between inside and field sales reps, and created a more optimal client experience.

“When we moved to this model, conflict went away almost overnight. We started building good, trusting relationships and all of a sudden, leads that we never had before were coming out of the woodwork. The inside reps were simply given more access into a wider range of accounts. Part of it was proving that we could manage and close more complicated deals.”

Forward Together

Where some might see brewing conflict in the interests of inside and outside sales teams, the larger picture is one of complementary strengths. Going

forward, strategic sales leaders will recognize and seize upon the opportunity to maximize profitable growth by capitalizing on the unique capabilities of each organization. It’s no longer a game of alphas and betas, lead and support, or high and low prestige. Great careers are now made across the sales spectrum, and a full set of specialized talents must be brought to bear by today’s executives and sales leaders to win in today’s demanding markets.

How to Get Started

The Inside-Outside Alliance is a proven strategy for next era selling. Let’s explore some of the ways you can drive profitable growth by building an Inside–Outside Alliance.

1. Implement a Sales Development Team.

If your average selling price and profit justifies it, this is one of the best ways to improve sales productivity and focus your quota-carrying reps on closing deals rather than fielding inbound inquiries, prospecting and building pipeline. You’ll also be building a bench of future sales professionals and business leaders with early-in-career talent. How you implement sales development depends on your biggest challenge or upside opportunity.

If your pipeline of qualified opportunities is weak or inconsistent, invest in an outbound sales development effort. If your inbound inquiries are going unanswered or your response time is delayed, a dedicated inbound lead generation function – or chat specialist - can help. Hiring the right people, setting the right expectations and goals, building the right compensation and career development plans, structuring and enabling the team for success, and building the right process flows and supporting the reps with technology will put you on the path to success.

If you already have a Sales Development team, look for ways to continuously improve each rep's activity and outcome metrics through education, technology, marketing, data, incentive plans, management and other levers. It's helpful to understand how your group's productivity compares to similar groups, so do a formal benchmarking project or talk to other leaders in similar companies and compare notes.

2. Implement A Team Selling Model.

Add a quota-carrying inside sales specialist to the field sales territory team to focus on opportunities that can be sold relatively easily, quickly and virtually (or with minimal face-to-face selling time) even to named or strategic accounts. The inside sales rep's role in this kind of Inside-Outside Alliance (sometimes called "Account Based Selling") could include selling to subsidiaries or divisions separate from corporate headquarters, renewing services or subscriptions, or introducing add-ons or lower-cost products that can be sold to departmental decision makers without multiple levels of approvals and legal review.

A "land and expand" strategy can work well in this kind of alliance as long as it is clear who is doing the "landing" (selling the first deal into an account) and who is doing the "expanding" (growing the initial deal or selling across a global organization) – the inside or outside rep. In general, a team selling model works best when the roles and responsibilities are crystal clear

and contributions can be measured, and company culture supports collaboration in addition to individual accountability.

3. Start a collaborative discussion.

Whether you are leading a field sales team, inside/digital sales team or both, you'll want to review these ideas, how they benefit the whole team and get buy-in from executives, marketing and information technology leaders, human resources and recruiting experts, and sales managers who may work in different parts of your organization. By asking your direct reports or peers for their ideas and concerns, you can avoid the distractions, conflicts or sabotage that sometimes plague cross-departmental initiatives.

4. Set measureable, achievable targets and continue improvements.

Know in advance what success looks like by setting clear goals and timeframes as well as who is responsible for what. Create a business plan with a rollout schedule with expected costs and return – and how long it will take to break even. Set expectations accordingly with senior leadership and the Board or investors. Once you know what works, continue or expand that investment, but don't stop looking for other areas in which to improve.

5. Celebrate and publicize success.

Promote your quantitative and qualitative results to senior management as well as company wide. Recognize the individuals and teams that helped you achieve them. Saying "thank you" and providing executive-level visibility are great ways to motivate superior performance.

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