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Touchy-Feely CRM: How to Get More Customer-Driven Data

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January 07, 2010

Almost all CRM systems are full of data that's been populated by your company's people. Sure, the notes and updates are about the customer relationship, but it's put in from your perspective and for your reasons, not the customer's. In many cases, the only information that has actually been put in the CRM system by the customer themselves is their name, e-mail address, and phone number.

[CRM: When Should Customer Service Run the Show?](#)
[CRM Definition and Solutions](#)

Inside the Sales Cycle

Why does this matter? Because the vendor-focused information in the CRM system can only indicate the state of play from your perspective: the action items done, the sales cycle steps in progress. The customer, however, is on a completely different schedule from you (they rarely have a need to close the deal by December 22), and their decision processes are working on a completely different plane. While your sales rep is worried about overcoming competitive objections or matching a feature, the customer is spending time trying to understand how any vendor's product would actually improve their business. The customer is trying to make the business case and understand the repercussions of a purchase that will make them more competitive, not you (the vendor).

This is most visible in the pipeline forecast. Almost all CRM systems have a "sales stage" field that indicates where the rep is in the sales cycle, and most have a "probability" field that is meant to indicate "likelihood of close." The first order of business is to have a serious review of the stages and associated probabilities, because most of the time they are bogus and much too easily gamed by the sales reps. This isn't a technology problem, it's just weak discipline. Get the sales leadership to define the entry and exit criteria for each sales stage. If you want to really tighten things up, take away the rep's ability to set the stage, and instead have it automatically set by responses to a survey form in the system (which enforces the entry and exit criteria).

Next, get your data analysts to look at the monthly pipeline data over the last year, to find out if "50 percent deals" close anywhere near 50 percent of the time. Expect the correlation to be highly skewed: reps are congenitally overoptimistic, and it's common to find that "90 percent deals" are only 60 percent likely to close. Adjust those percentages, both in your sales stage model and in the open opportunity records.

Now add the customer's perspective. They don't care about your sales cycle stages: they probably don't even know about them. Have marketing interview past prospects to find out what the major steps are in their decision process. Identify the entry and exit criteria for those steps, and add a new field in your CRM system's opportunity record to indicate "customer's decision phase." Use this as a source of customer intelligence as well as forecast accuracy.

But this, too, can be easily gamed. It's better set by the customer's behavior than by your reps. Doing



this means tightly integrating your CRM system to your Web site and document management system. For example, when a contact who's known to be associated with an opportunity downloads a pricelist, this event sets the "comparison" stage of the customer's buying process.

Taking this further, using social network activity can help you understand a lot more about what your customer is thinking. Salesforce.com's integrations with Facebook and Twitter are a step in this direction, although marketers and sales people have a lot to learn before they can reliably interpret any buying signals from it.

Facebook Bible: [Everything You Need to Know About Facebook](#)

Twitter Bible: [Everything You Need To Know About Twitter](#)

LinkedIn Bible: [Everything You Need to Know About the Social Network for Professionals](#)

After the Sales Cycle

In any healthy business, the customer relationship lasts a lot longer than the sales cycle. You want it to last for years, and be the basis for many sales cycles.

So it's important to design in as many touchpoints for the customer interactions as you can. The first step is to use your CRM system for customer service and support. Make sure your CSRs populate the CRM Cases with notes taken on every call, e-mail, or snail-mail interaction.

The next step is to use the close of any customer support interaction as the opportunity to collect customer satisfaction and product usage data. A six or seven question survey as the close of every "case" can become the basis of a substantial information asset, particularly if you ask a few new questions every time a customer contacts you. This automatic "health check" mechanism can help you spot problems early.

If your CRM system has a customer support portal, or you've built your own, you should configure the portal so it can be a direct source of input from the customer. The data you're looking for needs to go beyond just Case comments: you should be tracking any inbound requests, forum postings, "idea" voting, or other interactions between the customer and your Web presence. All of these provide important clues to who the customer is and how they are doing.

Adding data from social networks can provide you even deeper information about vocal customers, and can help head off "Internet firestorm" problems. Of course, you have to know your customers' social network handle — but this should be part of your user profile information on your portal registration page.

Finally, your CRM system should be the focal point for customer referencability. Any surveying done by your advertising, PR, or marketing personnel should be attached to the customer records. Referencability details should typically be attached directly to the individuals who have been interviewed, but referencability indicators should be rolled up to be visible at the opportunity and account level.

David Taber is the author of the new Prentice Hall book, "[Salesforce.com Secrets of Success](#)" and is the CEO of [SalesLogistix](#), a certified Salesforce.com consultancy focused on business process improvement through use of CRM systems. SalesLogistix clients are in North America, Europe, Israel, and India, and David has over 25 years experience in high tech, including 10 years at the VP level or above.

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