

Experts in
Business to
Business
Customer
Engagement

What to Do When the Sales Force Underperforms on Your Product

Whether you are a product marketer or director of marketing, it's your product and it is not hitting the numbers. If that doesn't change, they'll cut the product—or you. What should you do?

Signorelli Consulting Group, Inc.

Anthony Signorelli, President



SIGNORELLI
Consulting Group

An Increasing Portion of New Product Launches Underperform Against Plan in the Market

Whether you are a product marketer or director of marketing, it's your product and you find yourself on the hot seat. You have to hit the number. Leadership is holding you accountable. It's three months in, and the product is not hitting the numbers. If it doesn't change, they'll cut the product—or you. If it happens to you, what should you do?

First, calm down. It happens a lot, and there are proven answers. Second, a major cause of new product under-performance is this: *the sales force doesn't know how to sell it.*

It is happening all over the place because the new products require a different way of selling than the old products. In most cases, the sales force is using a method that has worked for them in the past. It's what they are trained to do, managed to do, expected to do, and measured to do. The problem is that the method doesn't work for the new product. For example...

- ❑ You can't sell software the same way you sell online information
- ❑ You can't sell capital equipment the same way you sell supplies
- ❑ You can't sell to large organizations the same way you sell to small business owners

If the sales force carrying your product is selling this way, they are likely to underperform for you. Results will be poor, and they will focus on other products.

What You Will Learn From This White Paper

Our recommended three-step solution process, described with the help of a case study. The three steps, which will be described in detail on the following pages are as follows:

1. Develop a detailed understanding of the questions and concerns of customers.
2. Create an engagement strategy, including a systemic response to each question or concern.
3. Re-structure and train the sales force to meet the new customer's needs.



What Do You Do?

Some of the best names in the business in terms of identifying a sales process include Geoff Thull (*Exceptional Selling* and *Mastering the Complex Sale*) and Keith Eades (*Solution Selling*). These generic approaches are an excellent framework for what is needed, but marketers and sales leaders need to go further. They need a detailed customer engagement process focused on

their customers and their sales force. Every customer situation is different. So while generic approaches have their power, a dangerous, mission critical situation like a product running behind plan requires a detailed understanding of the very specific business situation, market, sales process, and customers. The solution can only be something unique to your product, market, and organization.

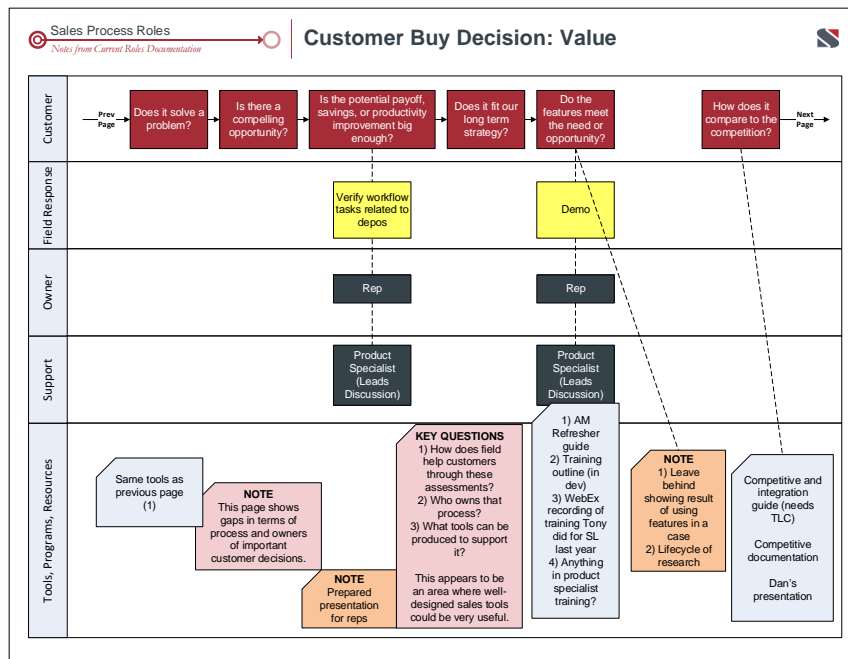
Customer Interest Inventory

Typically, when a new product is failing, the customer concerns are not being met. Yes, your market research team did their work. The positioning is correct. The messages are right. But the new product usually requires addressing a new set of customer concerns that sales reps didn't have to confront previously. All of a sudden, the IT department is involved. Or, they are facing CFOs when their previous buyers had discretionary budget authority. Or the customer culture is not suited to the new solution, and the customer doesn't know how to buy it. All these are hallmarks of the complex sale, and many sales organizations are simply not set up to meet this challenge.

If the product has been out for a period of time and your field force and marketers have had interactions with customers, you may be able to inventory their needs in a half day inventory session with your team. Our agenda composed of three key steps:

1. Brainstorm all the questions, concerns, and objections we heard.
2. Put them in rough chronological order as they arose through the sale
3. Identify the current responses to those questions, including who gave the response, the tools available, etc.

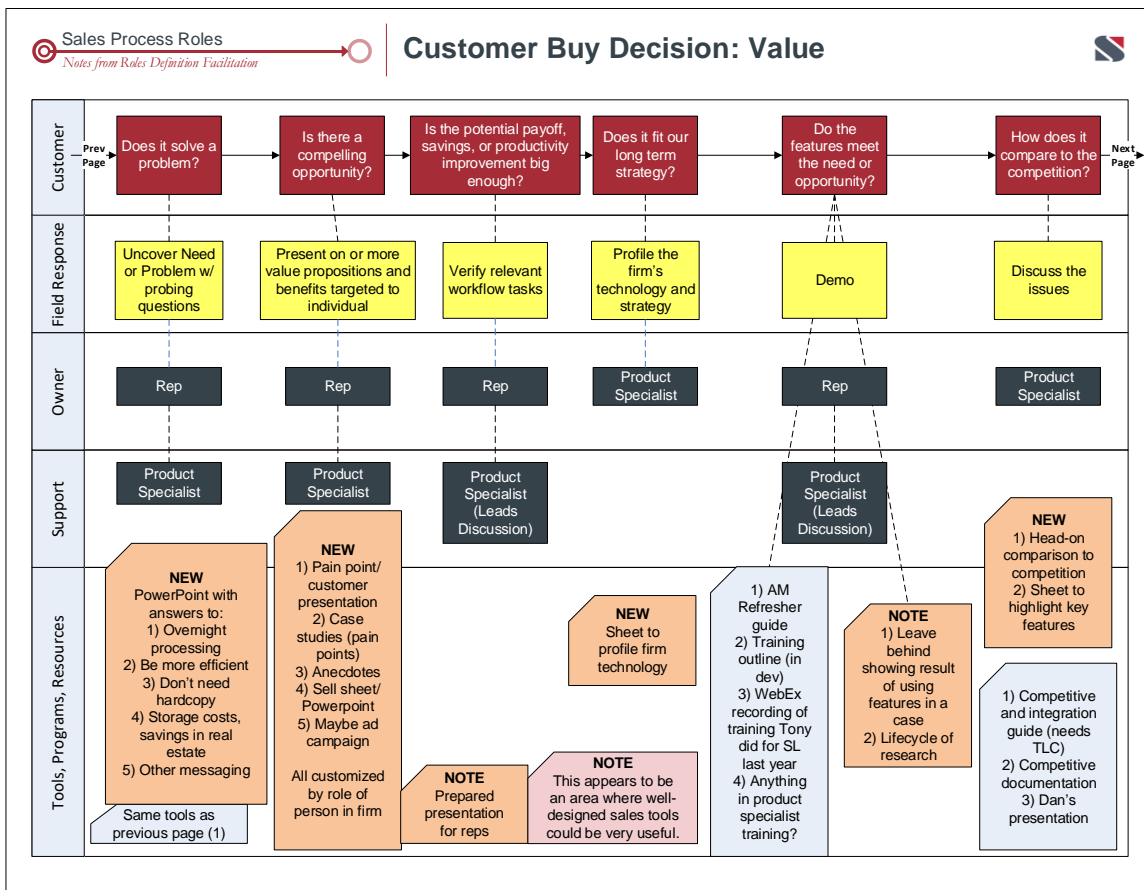
A sample page from the project is shown below. The white space indicates that no well-considered response was given, that no response was supported, and that no response was assigned to anyone on the sales team.



We developed a thirty-four page map of all the concerns, and most pages looked like this. Red customer questions across the top, and answers or responses to a few of those questions below. It showed the gaps in the process from start to finish. The field was unable to respond to almost two thirds of customer concerns. No wonder sales were flagging.

Engagement Strategy

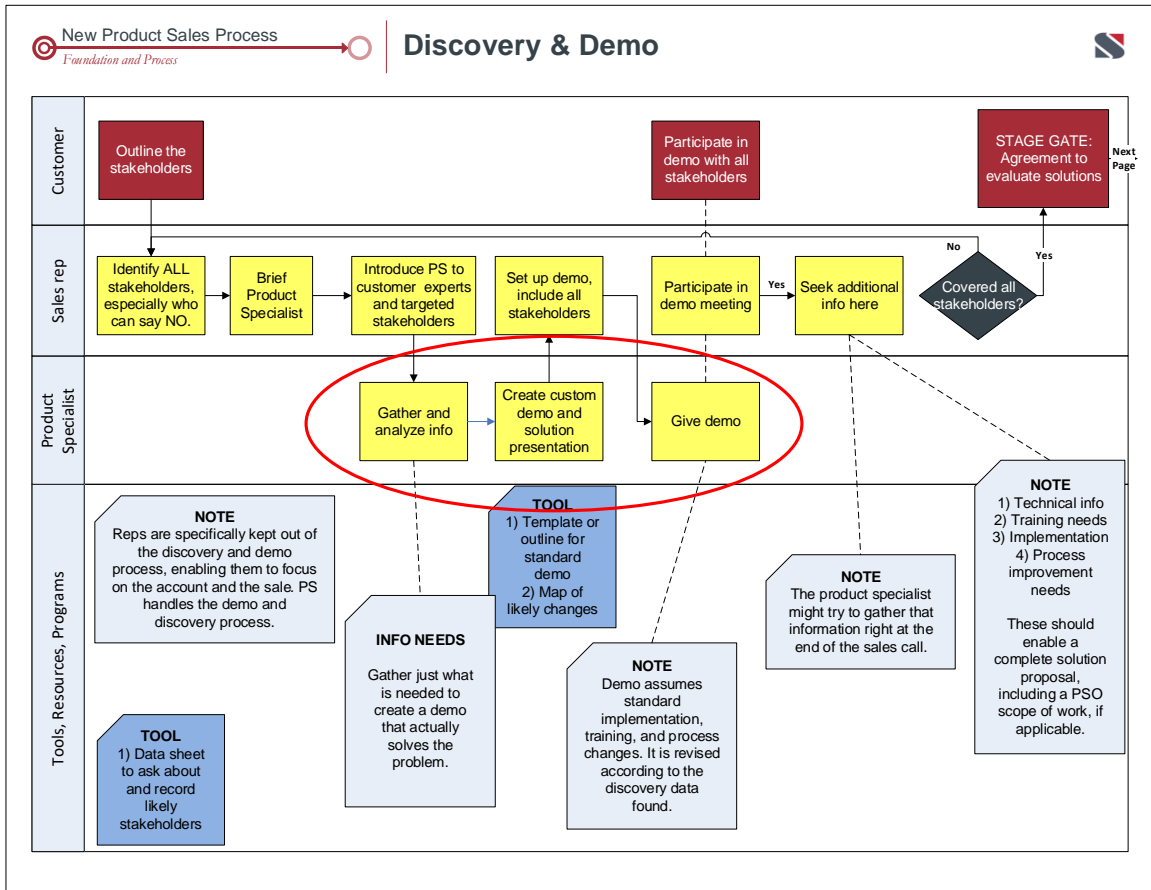
Next, the team needs to develop its engagement strategy. Review every customer concern or question, and develop a response: Who on the sales team is responsible? What are the appropriate answers? Where can they get them? What tools can you provide? In many cases, the answers are obvious given the sales force as it is. The result is a detailed plan of the things needed through the process. You can see an example below.



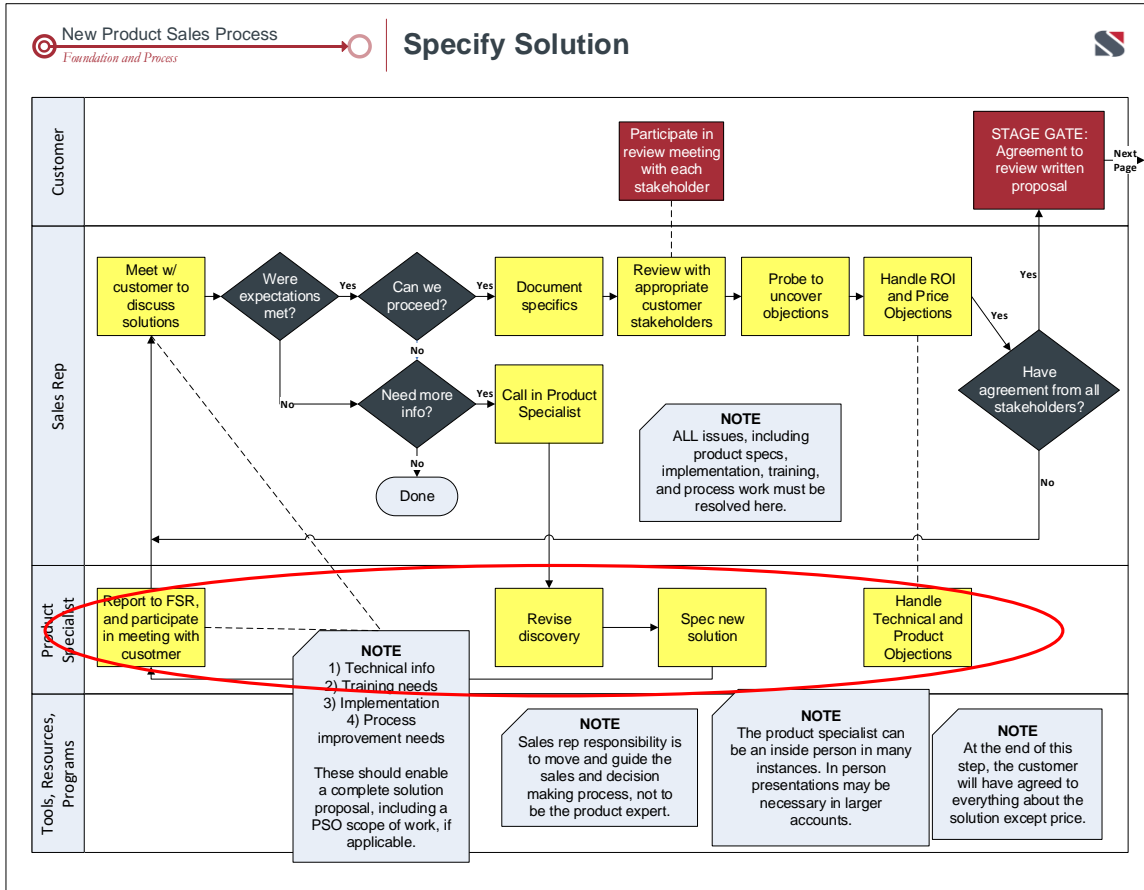
Because of the nature of the new product, however, it is common for there to be questions and concerns customers are asking which the current field force cannot answer. One typical example are the detailed technical concerns of an IT department. Such questions may also come from the people responsible for implementation and training, back office financial concerns, or any number of places. In some cases, the answer is to add training for AM your sales team. If they carry a large bag of products and services, however, adding technical knowledge that they sell on a relatively low frequency basis is probably not the best use of sales rep time.

An illustration of this situation occurred with a sales force launching a new software product being sold to small businesses—usually of less than ten people. The sales force learned the positioning and how to give a demonstration, then set out to sell it with some enthusiasm. In short order, however, they were confronted by technical questions that they had no background in answering. Finding that the questions derailed their entire sales call, the reps rationally decided not to pull the product out of the bag—preferring instead to sell other products which didn’t create such a problem. Although there was nothing wrong with the product, sales lagged, and the launch was gaining a reputation as a failure.

A new model of the customer engagement had to be created which would ensure accurate, timely responses to the customer questions. For example, the discovery and demo phase of the sale was changed to integrate the product specialist. It looked like this:



Likewise, the product specialist took a large role in specifying the solution that would meet the customer’s specific needs. Note that being very clear about who does what enables your personnel to operate as an efficient team. Some sales leaders prefer to rely on “creativity” of their sales people, but in a complex sale, this approach usually leads to confusion and frustration, not creative solutions.



Notice that the technical questions were to be handled by a specialist who had technical sales background, extensive product knowledge, and repeated engagement with the product and customers so that they could bring real mastery to the process.

Some people objected, at first, that this made the sale too complicated. That criticism was a mistake. The customer made the sale complicated because the customer had complicated needs. Sales reps would clearly be forced to step their game up a notch, but they were also relieved from the need to master technical details of a product. In other words, they were still enabled to be sales reps, not technical reps, and leverage their strongest skill set in meeting customer need.


Implementation Strategy

Once the new process has been determined, the next step is to create the team that can execute the plan. Usually, this means training the sales force in any new skills necessary to implement the new process. It also means hiring and training any new roles required for success in the market.

Rigorous assessment of the competencies of new personnel is required. Many companies fail to do this, and simply transfer people into new roles. In most cases, this approach turns out to be a mistake. A sales representative or a product training expert may be a good person, but if they lack the technical background to speak knowledgeably with IT staff, or to talk about change

management with an organizational development team concerned about implementation, they can't meet the specific requirements of the job. The background of the new hires needs to be carefully documented, and hired to. Make the right hires, and you dramatically increase the likelihood of success.

Next, training must be provided for sales reps and for the new roles. In many cases, sales reps will be forced to change their behavior in front of clients. For example, they may be most comfortable being the one person with all the answers in front of customers. A new process may require that they cannot be that person anymore. How do you transition effectively without damaging your credibility? How do you organize to bring in another resource? How do you use the new tools that have been created to answer customer questions? What are the signals indicating that you should bring in someone else? Reps will need more or less training in these and other areas to bring out the change you need.



“The best training programs simulate the real situations people face with customers.”

Similarly, the new roles will need to master their own competencies before going in front of clients. Again, many organizations miss this piece. They rely on the excellent background of the people they hired to do a good job. The problem in a large sales force is that is you bring in new specialists and they bomb on their first 1 or 2 appearances in front of customers, word spreads like wildfire in the sales organization: “Don't bring in so and so. It's a disaster!” Suddenly, the entire effort comes to a standstill. You are left having hired specialists who the field won't use, and who have nothing to do. This is not where you want to be.

The best training programs for these situations simulate the real situations people will face with customers. If you are fortunate enough to have an internal training department that can create a custom program in a timely fashion and execute it effectively, use that team. In most cases, internal training departments are not set up to do this kind of work—their primary job is onboarding new reps. If that's the case with your situation, outside training firms may be required.

Proven Results: A Controlled Pilot

One of our clients used this approach for a major new product. They needed five specialists to cover the market, and adding headcount was not part of the preferred picture. They wanted proof. Working with the marketing department, we structured a pilot test to see if the program would drive revenue the way we expected. Out of 31 regions, 6 were chosen to participate. Three were experimental—they got the specialist, pilot training, and appropriate management. They also were instructed in a new sales process and practiced utilizing the specialist. The other three were control and continued with selling the product as usual. The results were summarized as shown below.



PILOT	Regions without Specialist Process	Regions with Specialist Process	Difference
Unit Sales	3	15	5X Higher
Average Order Value	\$22,800	\$36,300	40% Higher
Bundled Products	None	Related solutions products	Incremental Sales

With unit sales and average order size up, the impact on revenue was profound. Executives were thrilled, and they went ahead with the new hires for the specialists, which was five new headcount. Two years after the launch of the full program, the process is still in place and being leveraged for similar types of products. What was a very small business has now grown to significant proportions. This sales force is exceeding its quota in the new product every year, and seems to be on a rapid growth trajectory.

Conclusion

New products often introduce new requirements on the sales force that are unanticipated. As a result, early returns may underperform expectations. When that happens, a systematic approach to the problem can uncover all needs, get your team on the same page, and lead to substantial change driven by the company. Success of the product is then not far around the corner. To learn more about what you can do when your sales force underperforms on your product, contact Tony Signorelli for a free consultation. You can reach Tony directly via email at: tony@signorelli.biz.





Signorelli Consulting Group

*Experts in Business to Business
Customer Engagement*

For further information on our services, see the white papers listed below, or reach out via phone or email. We look forward to speaking with you soon.

tony@signorelli.biz | 651-340-2196

➤ Supporting Medical Devices and Healthcare

(Click link for instant access)

- ❑ [*Customer Journey Mapping*](#)
- ❑ [*From Physicians to IDNs: Building the Medical Device Sales Force of the Future*](#)

➤ Legal and Financial Technology and Information

(Click link for instant access)

- ❑ [*Beyond Thought Leadership: The Cutting Edge in Content Marketing Strategy*](#)

About the Author

Anthony Signorelli is President of Signorelli Consulting Group, Inc., an innovative leader in customer engagement, marketing effectiveness, and sales optimization. Using tools such as customer research, field organization assessment, process mapping, workflow analysis, customer journey mapping, and industry leading sales training methods, Signorelli helps corporate leaders get the most out of their sales force. From executive sales leadership, to product marketers and call center managers, clients rely on Signorelli to bring the insights necessary to keep their sales forces in line with the needs of a rapidly changing market. Find us on the web at: www.signorelli.biz.

