

# Sales Fails

11 Mistakes to Avoid  
When You Want  
to Close the Deal



 sales cloud

## Introduction

Here at Salesforce, we're always striving to help businesses find the right track to success. Every year, we craft hundreds of blogs and e-books offering up new insights and smart advice to help companies win new business – fast. And while we've shared a lot of strategies and tips on what to do, sometimes it's also helpful to know what *not* to do when growing your business.

We talked to a handful of industry experts who shared 11 important insights about some common “sales fails” – all the things sales reps say and do (or don't do) that cause them to lose a potential sale. Don't worry, we're not leaving you hanging; those same experts offered up bonus tips on how to avoid making these very common sales mistakes.

### Sales Fail Tips

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**#1:** Not Knowing Your Buyer

**#2:** Solving the Wrong Problem

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## Not Knowing Your Buyer

Trying to sell to prospects who don't fit your ideal customer profile is a losing strategy. If your industry or product isn't right for the target, they'll likely just be annoyed that you didn't do your homework – and once irritated, they'll be lost for any future business. So make sure you identify who your key customer is before you ever pick up the phone or send an email.

Dan Perry, principal at the Sales Benchmark Index, a consulting firm, encourages sellers to ask three key questions:

- Who can you solve the biggest problem for?
- Which customers will create the greatest margins for your business?
- Who will love you the most?

Once you've identified the target client profile, use company websites, industry reports, social media, and referrals to find leads that fall within that target buyer framework. Simply taking the time to research appropriate prospects will go miles toward increasing your close rate.

A photograph of two women sitting at a desk in an office, looking at a laptop screen. The woman on the left has long red hair and is wearing a blue patterned blouse. The woman on the right has blonde curly hair and is wearing a white hoodie over a patterned scarf. They are both looking intently at the laptop. The background shows a window with vertical blinds.

**BONUS TIP:**

Focusing on groups of companies within your target audience saves research time. If you want to sell to independently owned and operated gourmet food companies, for instance, many will have similar painpoints that you can address.



## Solving the Wrong Problem

Oftentimes, salespeople who are proud of their products will focus on exactly that: a product, its features, and the business benefits it provides. But operating this way makes the seller appear out of touch with potential customers.

Social selling expert Jill Rowley tells us that in today's highly personalized business world, sales teams need to answer three questions:

- Why my product or service – for this specific customer?
- Why my company – for this specific customer?
- Why now – for this specific customer?

Thinking those questions through and coming up with real, compelling answers that explain how your product can solve a prospect's very specific problems will go a long way toward winning the sale.

**BONUS TIP:**

Once you've figured out how your product appeals to a prospect, don't try to close the deal immediately. "This happens in cold e-mails and cold calls," says sales productivity specialist Deb Calvert. "Sellers confuse offering a value proposition with offering a solution. The purpose of any initial contact is to earn more time with the prospect. The only way to do so is by offering relevant and intriguing value."





## Winging It

Going into a sales call without a plan is a mistake that novices and veterans both make, though for different reasons. Novice sellers may feel overwhelmed by their new job and unsure how to prepare for a sales call, while veterans may feel that they're too experienced to bother with a dress rehearsal. But taking time to think strategically about your next sales call or meeting will help your interactions go more smoothly.

Sales coach and trainer Alice Heiman advises that sellers next think through their desired outcome for the sales meeting, both for the prospect and themselves. What are the questions you should ask so that this prospect can be sure your product will be a good fit? Think of several and write them down.

This is a key step and can be a handy reference sheet for the sales meeting. You may even want to rehearse the call or meeting with a colleague or a supportive friend or partner beforehand – practice can ease nerves for the actual meeting.



**BONUS TIP:**

Before you go into a meeting, you need to know your BATNA: Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement.

In other words, know what you hope to achieve as a minimum result if you don't get a closed deal out of the call.





## Not Going Digital


Social selling expert Jamie Shanks, of Sales for Life, says he nearly went bankrupt as a business owner because he didn't understand the power of an online presence. But once he became active on LinkedIn and Twitter and built a valuable website, his business soared. And the data shows he's not alone.

[Research from Google and Corporate Executive Board](#) shows that buyers do not contact suppliers until 57% of their buying journey is complete. That means that they're defining the problem, forming opinions, coming up with the requirements for their desired solution, and

researching potential products on their own, largely via the Internet, and all without the help of your sales team. Shanks' own team found that 75% of client learning happens before a senior sales executive does a discovery call, and that the average customer consumes 7.5 pieces of content before they purchase anything.

“Buyers do not contact suppliers until 57% of their buying journey is complete.”

[Research from Google and Corporate Executive Board](#)

A woman with long, wavy red hair is looking down at a laptop screen. She is wearing a dark, patterned long-sleeved top and a necklace with a large circular pendant. The background is a blurred office environment with a red wall and a window.

In today's digitized world, product-based marketing that emphasizes features and benefits will no longer cut it. You need to be on the social platforms where your customers hang out (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter). The content on your websites should define the problem in a way that is relatable to the customer. Ideally, you want to create an “aha!” moment for them; once you do that, you can position your product as the best way to solve the problem. [Research from Forrester](#) shows that salespeople who help clients address their business challenges with a specific solution path close the deal 74% of the time. So if you want to win the sale, you need to connect with the customer long before they come to you.

**BONUS TIP:**

The beauty of online content is that it reveals where a customer is in the buying process. Shanks' sales team sees customers respond to a call to action when they download a document from his website. Only when the prospect continues to consume more content, showing that he is invested, does the sales team pick up the phone and call.



## Getting a Late Start

The customer buying process goes through specific stages: identifying the problem, evaluating the options, defining a solution, and making a decision. Most salespeople enter the process when customers are **evaluating options**. But sales experts say this is really too late.

[Research from the Aberdeen Group](#) shows that on average, organizations only close 16% of sales leads that are considered “sales-ready opportunities.” Businesses can improve that rate by getting into the buying game when the customer is still working to define the problem. In this stage, businesses can help customers reframe and solve their problems in the most effective way.



**BONUS TIP:**

If a prospect tells you they're thinking of changing vendors, don't wait 6 months to call them back. Instead, get on their calendar in the next three weeks, advises Craig Elias, a sales consultant. "They're defining the problem," says Elias. By getting on the client's calendar right away, "I help them reframe the problem. When I do that I am five more times likely to win the business."





## Sales Fails Tip #5

# Not Knowing All Your Buyers

It's an easy mistake: You connect with one prospect who seems fairly high up in the organization and appears interested in your product – until they stop answering your calls. There is a good reason for this: Businesses today rarely have a single individual making all the buying decisions alone. But if you don't know who those other decision-makers are, then you will have a hard time turning your pitch into a sale.

Heiman, the sales coach, recommends you ask upfront who else is involved in the decision-making process. Once you know, try to empathize with that buyer and think through that particular buyer's eyes and how you would appeal to their concerns. Then target your sales pitch accordingly. A director of procurement is going to want to save money, while a CEO will likely want to grow her business.

**BONUS TIP:**

Ask the person you are talking to, "How can I help you get the rest of your team on board?" This insight will help you help them sway their colleagues.





## Focusing on Your Quota

Salespeople, understandably, constantly feel pressure to hit their numbers. And that can make them act imprudently. At the end of the month or the quarter, they might pressure the buyer, try to negotiate too quickly or discount the product (which has the negative effect of making the product lose value, not to mention being a terrible precedent that will be hard to backtrack from in the future). None of these are winning strategies – not for the seller and not for the buyer. If you're focused on the pressure, it makes you out of sync with the prospect, and you lose sight of meeting the buyer's needs.

If possible, speak with your manager about the quota, advises Perry, the sales consultant, with the goal of potentially lowering it to a more attainable rate. Ask them to explain how they arrived at your number. Was your win rate considered? How about the average sales price or sales cycle length, the industry growth, and your territory's growth? You're more likely to be smart and strategic when you feel less tension.

If you can't get the quota lowered, you may want to undertake some mindfulness or stress-reduction practices to help you stay calm and maintain perspective – because letting your anxiety shape the customer interaction in a negative way just won't bring the results you want.

**BONUS TIP:**

Avoid sales quota pressure in the first place by moving confidently for the close at the appropriate time. “Saying ‘Why don't you think about this, and I'll call you next week?’ instead of ‘Are you ready to move forward?’ suggests there must be something to think about,” says Calvert.





## Talking Smack

Alice Heiman, who trains sales teams, tells this story: “Someone I work with was talking to a friend about her client at a bar and the people from the company overheard. They walked up and said, ‘We heard you and we are telling our boss not to do business with you anymore.’”

Big sales fail.

It should go without saying that you shouldn't speak poorly about your customers – ever. But if you do have a customer who gives you fodder to rant about them, consider why you're working with them in the first place. If someone is a terrible fit for your product or even your particular personality, something needs to change. "You may need to have some serious conversations with them that may include your management," Heiman says. "Make things right or part gracefully."

### **BONUS TIP:**

If you don't actually like a potential customer, perhaps you should walk away, Rowley advises. If that's not the best option, then do whatever it takes to develop empathy so that the other person no longer gets under your skin. This is really about working on yourself.





## Bouncing Emails

If your emails to a customer are bouncing because they've changed their job, consider it an opportunity to follow your client into a new company. But that's not the only opportunity from an email bounce, says Craig Elias, the sales consultant.

Your original client likely replaced someone. Find out where that person went and pitch him. That's a total of new opportunities. Then, once your original client has been replaced at her old company, pitch to that person. That's a third opportunity. Finally, find out that person's old company, and pitch to her replacement. Voila – four new opportunities from a single bounced email.



**BONUS TIP:**

When you make the call to these new prospects, don't make the mistake of telling that person exactly what you do: such as "I sell really expensive tires." "Use verbs to get the conversation going," Elias says. Instead, try this "If I told you I could make you the preferred vendor in your industry, how much interest would you have?"



## Going It Alone

This is a tough one because it requires your management to buy into organizational change. But as a salesperson, you are incredibly valuable to the company and your insights matter. You won't get far in sales if you're playing the role of a hunter when you're really better at farming. If you're better at hunting new business, stick to that. If you're good at upselling and cross-selling to existing customers, make that your brand.

Likewise, your support team needs to be able to turn a quote around relatively quickly so that you can close the deal. Ask for investment in that arena if it's slowing you down. Finally, make sure that your compensation plan aligns with the company's goals. If you're paid based on revenue, you won't care about margin, and you'll discount like crazy – maybe even lose a sale by cutting price so far that you remove value. Talk to your supervisor about aligning your pay structure with management's goals.

**BONUS TIP:**

The key to convincing management to invest in new systems is showing them that it costs more not to. Keep good records, and present management with a compelling business case that shows losses on revenue that can be attributed to insufficient back office and systems support.





Sales Fails

Tip

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## Undertraining

It's pretty hard to manage all your prospects, inbound emails, outbound calls, and a packed calendar by paper – or worse yet, to keep it all in your head. Having a system to keep proper tabs on your relationships can save time, help you prioritize leads, and boost sales productivity. Even small sales teams can benefit from a customer relationship management (CRM) system.

Likewise, you can lose a sale by not being trained properly. If you ask your manager what to do and they respond that you should hit your number, swallow your pride and ask them to coach you more specifically. Remember, it's their job to help you succeed, and it's your responsibility to ask for help. Regardless of what type of manager you have, invest in self-training by reading books from leading sellers and attending trainings whenever possible. The investment in will be well worth the effort.

**BONUS TIP:**

The best CRM systems are mobile-first and cloud-based, and provide a single customer view across sales, service, marketing, and IT. Want to learn more? [Test drive Salesforce today >](#)





## Conclusion

Avoiding the biggest sales fails requires spending time to research and plan, as well as thinking about the buyer's perspective – steps that might be new to those who are used to winging it. It's also helpful to get management on board to ensure that systems – including compensation structure, quote turnaround time, and CRM – serve the customer and don't slow the process. Finally, a salesperson should always use his or her strengths. By avoiding the 11 common sales fails explored in this ebook, you'll be better positioned to boost your win rate and help your business keep growing.



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