

## Operations and Sales, They Need Each Other

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We are primarily a sales company. As owner, I take sales very seriously, and focus a majority of my time and effort on that. Can you please explain what you mean when you talk about Operations?

In general, Operations is the part of the organization that takes over, once the customer says, "Yes"; the people, practices, equipment, and processes necessary to deliver whatever it is that Sales committed to. Operations is the company's face to it's customers, and the source of the company's revenue.

In a highly sales driven company, sales often carries the ball well beyond an initial engagement. Sometimes sales performs all of the operational duties. This is particularly the case in the brokerage and search industries, where there is no inventory to handle, nothing to manufacture, and most of the delivery is informational, related to closing a deal.

Why would you want to think about Operations as separate and distinct from sales? First, it is always an advantage when you can isolate functions, and focus people on what they do best. Often sales people are great at creating new relationships, and nurturing relationships until a deal is ready to happen. That's the classic job of a sales person. That doesn't mean that sales people are good at handling all of

the paperwork, communications, and details necessary to bring a deal to fruition.

Most operational functions require detail, documentation, and rigorous, on-time follow-up. They require that someone be in the office, attending to details, not out on the road chasing the next opportunity. That means that if you're a sales person, you have to choose between getting the next customer, and following up to finish the deal with the last – and sometimes things fall between the cracks as you try to do both.

Think of it this way. As a potential customer, my needs are focused on figuring out if your company can handle my needs. I want to get to know what your company has done for other firms like mine. I want to talk about what I need and see how that fits with what your firm does.

Once I decide to become a customer, my needs change dramatically. I am no longer asking questions about whether you can handle my business. Instead, I'm demanding you step up to the plate and deliver what you promised. I'm following up to be sure you meet my standards.

As a customer, I want your company to make the switch with me. I want you to no longer treat me like a prospect. I want to be acknowledged as someone important to, and engaged with

your business. And I want your firm to switch gears from providing information about what you do, to delivering the information or resources I hired you to get for me. And that probably means another skill set, beyond what sales typically does for your organization.

You need to be able to predict how long it will take to take my account from saying, "Yes, I'll hire you", to being satisfied that I've received what I wanted. You need to keep track of my account's progress, and tell me if you're running into problems. You need to keep me updated on my options, and follow up on lots of little details.

Figuring out how to switch from sales to operations has several advantages for your company. Customers are often more secure, and receive better treatment if a team of people, including both sales and operations, are looking after their needs. If someone calls in sick, takes a vacation, or otherwise can't come in to work, the customer still is attended to. And, as owner, you get more information, from more points of view, as to what is going on with the customers you've worked hard to get on board.

Clients generally have a superior experience if they are handled by people who have done the same thing time after time. A team dedicated to handling clients can



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usually do a superior job at quality assurance, which usually translates into higher amounts of repeat business. They can measure, analyze, and improve what they do. Many operations functions are less expensive, if you can institute process and routine, and break the job of delivering into smaller increments.

And, by freeing up your sales people to go back out and hunt for more business, you're going a long way towards insuring that new sales won't slow your organization's growth.

Bottom line, sorting out operations from sales will make money for your company, free people up to do what they're best at, and go a long ways towards insuring customers are attended to in the best possible way.

Looking for a good book? Try Market Leadership Strategies for Service Companies, by Craig Terrill and Arthur Middlebrooks.

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