

Initiative Overload

by Ken Evans and Sue Shaner



What can be the impact on your sales organization and company when you have too many “irons in the fire” internally? There are many important projects and initiatives that must be undertaken within any company in order to meet current standards, implement better ways of doing things, and adjust for other market influencers, and customer requirements. But it is also important to realize that you must constantly weigh the value each new initiative brings and balance that with the value you provide to your customer and the results produced for your company.

We at CPS have frequently observed our clients’ sales organizations tied up with “Initiative Overload.” One of our clients did an inventory of projects in place to improve sales effectiveness and was astounded to discover that the list exceeded 100 projects! The sales executive was aghast, especially because most of the projects had very little to do with improving the customers’ view of her company.

How could this happen? By design, sales organizations are creative and responsive, and they are inherently aware that they need to “look good.” Talented people have many good ideas, and they understand that there is always room for improvement. In particular, the non-customer-facing staff tends to be internally focused and has a limited view of the issues with which the sales team and customers are wrestling. The result can be an abundance of ideas and it is natural to want to put these ideas into action. However, when the vision for the organization and the associated priorities are not well understood, activating these ideas into projects and initiatives without first considering their context and priority will result in activities that distract the customer-facing team from the company’s priority—the customer.

What is the result? When too many projects and initiatives are underway, management’s calendar and energy are diverted from focusing on the customer; customer priorities are also not reflected in the actions of the staff. The staff becomes distracted, and while working harder than ever, ends up wasting valuable time and energy on non-urgent, unimportant issues. Often, the “field” sales force is inundated with requests for information. As they assess the importance of these requests and respond to them, the field’s view of the headquarters staff and its value dissipates. The net? Sales and sales support costs go up. Sales results go down.

How do you get out of this spiral?

The first step is to acknowledge that it is line employees and customers that understand the truth of what is going on in the marketplace. Valued communications about what is happening and what is really required for success depreciate with distance. Sales managers and executives need to actively use all available information channels to ensure that the customer's priorities are reflected in their vision, actions, and initiatives. Information channels about what's really required are available both internally and externally. Typical information channels include the following:



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| Internal | ▪ Company Surveys | ▪ Employee Discussions | ▪ Loss Reviews | ▪ Account Reviews |
| | ▪ Pipeline Reviews | ▪ Coaching Sessions | ▪ Staff Meetings | ▪ Strategy Sessions |
| External | ▪ Customer Calls | ▪ Customer Surveys | ▪ Strategic Partners | ▪ Internet/Web sites |
| | ▪ Trade Journals | ▪ Industry Seminars | ▪ Industry Research | ▪ Community Contacts |

Determining the Most Important Initiatives

- Where is this initiative on the customer's priority list?
- Would my front-line salespeople agree that this initiative is critical?
- Will this initiative help us differentiate ourselves in the marketplace?
- Do we have the resources available to drive this initiative to completion? Can it be accomplished in a reasonable amount of time?
- How will this initiative impact sales results? What about the bottom-line?
- How does this initiative fit with the vision for our company?

Once the customer priorities are well understood and integrated into the organization's vision, the sales executive should think critically about what must be accomplished and the ease with which change can be achieved. At this point, a list of Most Important Initiatives can be selected that align resources and priorities. Initiative selection can be painful. Selection infers that someone's pet project will be shelved. But the pain will be worth it. After selecting the most important, focus should then be on execution—driving this short list of initiatives to conclusion.

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