How to Turn Sales Barriers Into Breakthroughs

Overcoming Business Development Challenges in Complex Manufacturing Sales Environments

Athena SWC

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What in the World is Happening Here?

As a sales leader, that's a question you're likely asking yourself and your team frequently.

Whether you're new to your position and have inherited an empty pipeline, are alarmed at the glacial pace of your sales cycle, or are shocked at how consistently your team fails to move leads forward, it's clear there's a problem.

At first, it might be tempting to come down hard on your sales team. Clearly, it's their fault. They're slow and unmotivated. They're not following consistent processes or best practices. They're not using available tools or technology.

While people themselves can certainly be problematic, they're not always the issue. In fact, the cause of stagnant or underperforming business development teams is often the structure of the function itself. For example:

- Sales teams are often tasked with more than revenue generation — alarmingly, only 39% of sales teams spend their time selling

- Many sales teams are aging and aren't adaptable to changing purchase preferences

- Building the infrastructure needed for sales expansion or acceleration is costly and time-consuming

- Deals often languish in pipelines, leading to lengthy sales cycles

That's just a sampler of the many challenges facing business development teams in the broader manufacturing industry today.

Whether you're in plastics, metals, corrugated, custom tooling, electronics, folding cartons, pharmaceuticals, or virtually any other manufacturing industry, the foundational issue here is that resources are not available or are not being used properly.

In this overview, we'll dive into these challenges — grouped into helpful categories — and many more to identify solutions to enable manufacturers to grow their revenue and hit their goals.

Let's get started.

Infrastructure

A Lack of Talent and Expertise in Marketing

The first issue rests not with business development itself but with its strategic partner within an organization: marketing. Often, business development leaders are also responsible for marketing — an entirely separate skill set. The issue here is that you're not marketers: you're sales professionals. Thus, you'll need to find marketing talent to support business development.

Finding the right employees for your manufacturing business has likely been a challenge for a long time, perhaps even before the talent shortages that arose in 2021 after the pandemic. Often, finding and retaining people who bring the right marketing skills can be competitive and time-consuming. Even if you do find them, you'll spend a significant amount of time onboarding and training them on your organization. (And of course, this all assumes that your organization even has the resources available to build a team.)

Recommended Solution

If you're struggling to find talent or don't have the resources to build out a separate marketing function, outsourcing to an agency or related firm is the ideal solution. Hiring for these roles takes longer and results in more overhead. By outsourcing, you save on salaries while gaining a wide range of talented professionals who are experienced in marketing strategy, web development, SEO, content marketing, social media, paid search, and more.

No Proactive Outbound and Inbound Marketing

If you do have a marketing team, how are they proactively supporting business development? Marketing practices can be divided into two categories: inbound and outbound. **Inbound is positioning your business where prospects are looking** for solutions and using certain tactics to pull them into the funnel. Examples include SEO, nurturing email campaigns, paid social, and content marketing. **Outbound is reaching out to prospects to engage** and educate them on your services. Examples include cold calls, outreach emails, paid media/ads, and direct mail.

Recommended Solution

Whether you have an internal team or an outsourced agency, inbound and outbound must work together proactively to support sales. This is because inbound takes time. Thus, it's best to dedicate energy early toward outbound while inbound infrastructure is built.

Once both are up and running, outbound continues to lead the charge in building strong pipelines while inbound captures and nurtures prospects. Utilizing both channels helps to keep lead flow strong and ensure sales is making progress toward revenue growth goals.

Outdated Target Prospect and Company Lists

It's likely that within the mix of prospect sources you and your team use for new business, there is a list of companies and contacts that should be targeted. The challenge here is that these lists or databases are often not kept up to date.

While it's impossible to follow every person on that list, what you don't want is to come back to the list after some time only to discover that most of those targets have left. Now your list is smaller, and you need to spend more time researching when you should be selling.

Recommended Solution

Leverage a front-end sales model. Rather than your most experienced sales leaders handling prospect list management, a front-end sales team handles, builds, maintains, and nurtures those contacts on their behalf.

This allows your team to stay focused on higher-priority tasks and goals. The result is a clear picture of who needs to be targeted, a better allocation of resources, and less time wasted on prospects that won't receive your message because the data is too outdated.

Performance

Limited Sales Team Accountability and Productivity

A common challenge in manufacturing is that sales teams **have more to do than ever — but less time to do it**. Teams are often responsible for non-sales tasks that might include account management, customer service, and even production.

The impact is obvious: a sales team that spends less time on sales sells less. Not only that, but prospects currently in the funnel receive less attention — extending the amount of time needed to bring those deals across the finish line.

Recommended Solution

Recommended Solution: While account management responsibilities may be unavoidable, reassigning key parts of the sales process reduces low-value work that your talented sales team has to perform (prospecting, nurturing, follow-up, etc.).

This allows them to **focus on high-priority tasks as well as deals that are ready to move forward** and to dedicate more time to closing them. The result is a more productive and accountable sales team that's doing the right kind of work.

Absence of Sales Coordination

Does your sales team tend to focus only on new leads? Are they not keeping up with past quotes or open opportunities? Chasing the "shiny new object" is a common habit, but if your sales team is doing this, you're likely missing out on significant revenue.

Staying in touch with contacts that have an active (or even expired) quote is essential to moving it forward, but understandably, this can take time away from new business development. **This is where sales coordination comes in**.

Recommended Solution

With a front-end sales solution in place, your core sales team doesn't have to individually manage every past or open opportunity and maintain consistent touch points with those contacts.

Having front-end sales specialists assist with pipeline management, support the sales team in meetings, coordinate quotes, and more will result in a more compressed sales cycle, more efficient pipeline management, and stronger customer relationships.

Inconsistent Touchpoints with Open Opportunities

You've probably been in this situation before, and understandably so — it's an easy trap to fall into. We all get busy, and as we noted earlier, sales teams are typically tasked with far more than just revenue generation responsibilities.

Unfortunately, that means deals that are in active or qualified stages of your pipeline are likely sitting there without much attention. This slows down your sales cycle and puts deals at risk.

Recommended Solution

Consistent touches with prospects are key, especially in manufacturing sectors where the time between the first touch and a meeting can be anywhere from a few to several months — or more.

While automation can help, people are now conditioned to receive those messages. Calling can have a significant impact, and companies that **stay on their game statistically see better results**.

Leaving Quotes Open Too Long

How many open quotes do you currently have in your pipeline? How many of them are more than 30 days old? Sixty days? This isn't unusual — you get close to the finish line only for the contact to go dark.

But with a packed day, consistently following up is difficult. The reality is that you and your most experienced salespeople shouldn't be doing this administrative follow-up.

Recommended Solution

This is where the division of labor concept comes into play. With a stronger infrastructure that carves out front-end sales and follow-up tasks, your more experienced sales team can focus on deals that are actively engaged — compressing the sales cycle and growing revenue faster. Meanwhile, aging and stalled deals **are still pursued until a resolution is reached**, which keeps your pipeline organized and moving.

Evaluation

No Analytics for Decision-Making

While you may have an ERP system or some other database management software in place, what solutions is your team using to manage prospects as they move through the sales cycle?

Do you have **marketing automation that can track prospects' activity** and give the sales team insight into what's driving interest? Are you able to view the **results of marketing and sales work** and make informed decisions based on that data?

Recommended Solution

Unfortunately, many manufacturers today can't say "yes" to these questions. Even if you do have technology in place, you might lack the time or personnel to use it sufficiently. By leaning on an outsourced partner, you receive this technology as part of the relationship. This allows your team and those supporting you to measure progress, identify opportunities for improvement, and pivot when necessary.

No Clear Return on Investment

With any business development growth effort, you need to know that you're getting what you've paid for — and that it has a positive impact on the bottom line.

Whether you're building a team internally or have decided to outsource, the right team will not only relentlessly pursue new opportunities but will also **tell you what their impact will be financially**.

Recommended Solution

With just a few bits of information, your partner can take current lead flow metrics, conversion rates, and other sales data and generate an estimated ROI for you based on similar performance for related companies. **Learn more about how this works here**.

Overcome Every Challenge

Athena SWC partners with manufacturers with complex sales cycles that need to implement a structured approach to the front end of their sales cycle.

We provide and execute our proven front-end sales infrastructure (people, processes, and technology tools) to grow both new accounts and current customer accounts. Our process model applies to the various sales channels (direct sales forces, manufacturing reps, and distribution channels) across a variety of manufacturing industries, including metals, corrugated, flexible packaging, plastics, custom tooling, medical devices, and electronics.

If your current business development activities are not producing results, if you are looking to enter new markets, or if your sales team lacks the "hunting" skill set required to deliver qualified sales opportunities, look to Athena SWC's customizable program to help you fill your sales pipeline with leads that convert.

Our Process Works — and We Can Prove It

TYOGA Go Beyond
Plan. Pack. Protect. Ship.

- Closed account with $1M in annual spend
- Added $2.5M in annual spend potential
- Closed 7 new accounts in 8 months

Read the case study

TUSCO MFG

- Closed sale with $1M potential
- Added $700K to its active pipeline
- Quoted $950K from generated leads

Read the case study

DLX DELUXE PLASTICS

- Quoted more than $2.7M
- Closed $1.5M in new account sales
- Delivered over $550K in quotes

Read the case study

Crystal

- Added $2M to its sales pipeline
- Closed nearly $300K in quotes
- Saw an 80% increase in web traffic

Read the case study

Take the First Step

Learn How Our Process Works

Schedule an overview webcast of Athena's new business development process model. For a 60-minute time investment, your team will leave with a clear understanding of how our process model is designed, implemented, executed, and measured for impact and ROI, as well as a very detailed understanding of how our model can be applied to your business environment, manufacturing capabilities, and target markets.

Schedule a Call

Reach Out Directly

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Join Us for an Upcoming Event

We regularly host informative sessions specifically for manufacturers. Learn more about our process, discover the latest industry trends, and get sales and marketing insights straight from our team of experts.

Sign Up Now