SalesPlaybook

B2B Startup Sales Secrets: Sell, Scale, Thrive

How to Build & Scale Sales From 0 to 20 Million ARR

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Startups that sell are Startups that scale

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue: How we got here in the first place	**8**
Part A: B2B Sales Myths Debunked	11
0-10k: Closing your first deal	11
1. Build it and they will come	11
Product cycle of death: Building more will not lead to selling more	11
Nobody waited for you. Few people will buy on their own	12
Sell first, build the RIGHT thing, sell more of the same thing	12
2. I'm not yet selling	13
Startup "sales" is ⅓ business model, ⅓ go-to-market and ⅓ sales	13
Zero pipeline today might mean zero sales in the next three to six months	13
Revenue is the primary driver of value creation	14
3. Fundraise first, sales later	14
Stories are OK, traction is good, financial independence is great	14
Why customer money is worth multiple that of investor money	14
Show me your sales and I'll show you the investors and terms you can get	15
4. Product-driven growth is the way to go	15
Fine. Once you know the product to build that drives growth.	15
Money talks. Words walk.	15
Product-driven growth is expensive	15
5. Incubators / Accelerators will teach me B2B sales	16
Reality says no. Because they are not built for that.	16
Fix sales BEFORE you join to get maximum value	16
No startup ever died of too little feedback	16
10-100k: Selling - and invoicing(!) your 1st 100k	17
6. I have enough leads from my network	17
Your professional network is (typically) not your Ideal Customer Profile	17
"I have a large network" is the lamest pitch of any salesperson	18
Predictable revenue comes from repeatable outbound sales	18
7. Deals will close within weeks	18
Trust drives speed. Case studies, credibility and authority build trust	18
Everything always takes longer than expected	19
SMBs first, corporates second	19
8. I don't need a CRM, it's all in my head	20
Your head is great. But you want to build a business, right?	20
Get a CRM for free, in less than two hours, with no technical background	20

Start with fundamentals, get quick wins, go from there. 20
9. My network is enough to find product-market-fit 21
Again. Your network is NOT enough to find product-market-fit 21
Find 500 people with the same demographics, challenges and objectives 21
Be real about your unit economics and conversions 21
10. Channel sales will fix market traction 22
Channel partners have day jobs. If shit hits the fan, you don't matter 22
If you can't sell your product, nobody else can - or will 22
Don't be stingy with referral fees and incentives. Invest in your partners 22
100k-1 Million: Closing 10 deals in a niche 23
11. I know what the customer wants 23
Prescription without diagnosis is malpractice. 24
Doctors lose their license for that
Stop selling, let people buy. Think buyer journey, not sales process. 24
It's 2021, not the "Roaring 80s of ABC - Always Be Closing" 24
12. It's time to sell big tickets to corporates 25
Big tickets take big time - duration and time investment 25
Big corporates love letting others trying and failing or succeeding first 25
Don't be(come) dependent on one or two big customers 25
13. It's time to hire VP Sales 26
A VP Sales leads three to 10 salespeople. 26
Do you have three to 10 salespeople?
There are 48 types of VP Sales. Make sure you get the right type 26
VP Sales are a big investment. Can they add 500k+ in annual revenue? 26
14. It's time to expand to new verticals 27
Focus on a niche. At all times. Then take the next closest niche. 27
Expansion is dilution. Dilution kills focus. Focus is your biggest asset. 27
Expand when you conquer a niche. Until you do, don't. 28
15. It's time to establish a sales organisation 28
If in doubt, fill the sales funnel. 28
"We build shit, and we sell shit and everything else is bullshit" 29
Middle management before 10 FTEs might be too early 29
1-5 Million: Cross the Chasm 30
16. I found product-market-fit 30
There's no "bells and whistles". But inbound leads tell a lot. 30
Message-market fit leads to product-market-fit 30
Build a "cookie-cutter". B2B sales is ideally 0 intellectual work. 31
17. It's all about the money 31
Money is keeping score as a consequence of value creation 31
"Colour of money" is a real thing. New versus existing revenue matters 31
It's time to fix your Cash Conversion Cycle. Before you die. 32

18. Domain expertise is a must for sales hires 32
Domain expertise can be taught, quickly. Attitude not. 32
Focus on "jobs to be done", not on what salespeople are selling you 33
Domain expertise can come with a "this is how the world works" mindset 33
19. Sales structure kills my culture 34
Hollywood does not write movie scripts to kill creativity 34
Scaling up requires repeatability. Repeatability requires structure 34
Cluster risk kill startups and founder-dependency is a cluster risk. 34
20. Let's figure out sales once and we're done 35
1% better every day is 37x better every year. 35
You will sell different deals to different buyers in different models. Adapt. 35
Becoming successful is hard. Remaining successful is harder. 35
5-20M & Beyond: Scale Sales Predictably 37
21. Hiring more salespeople will fix traction 37
Hire out of opportunity, not neediness. If it's not "hell yeah", then it is a no. 37
"Hire slow, fire fast", people say. But don't fire fast if you're the problem. 38
If attitude, intelligence and coachability are there, keep talent.
If not, then don't. 38
22. Salespeople will fully ramp within three months if not three weeks 38
Get your s*** together BEFORE people hit the ground. 38
If your sales cycle is six months, how can one fully ramp in three months? 39
Great sales reps have questions for you. Bad sales reps make excuses. 39
23. The CEO should stop selling now 40
The CEO must always sell. Customers, talent, investors. 40
CEO = "Close Every Opportunity" 40
Ego Is The Enemy. Your job now is to make other people rockstars 40
24. Hiring great sales talent is reasonably easy 41
The war for B2B sales talent is over. Talent has won. 41
Talent acquisition is "just" another funnel. Sell the job well. 41
Plan two to three months to attract, onboard and ramp sales talent 41
25. ABC - Always Be Coaching (by Alen Cerovina) 42
You don't hire a superstar and expect him to train himself 42
ABC² - "Always be coaching" to "always be closing" 42
Internal vs External: Same words, different behaviours 43
Part B: 84 micro-scripts to go from zero to 20 Million euros ARR quickly 44
0 Master the fundamentals 44
#1 Quid pro quo 44
#2 Ego is the enemy 44
#3 Date In Date Out 45
#4 Value before price 45

#5 Use useful use cases 45
#6 Reward returns, reverse risks 46
#7 Why before what before how 46
#8 Understand before being understood 46
#9 Script successful selling propositions 47
#10 Make it simple to understand & evaluate 47
1 Setup your success 48
#11 Begin with best of breed 48
#12 Validation before automation 48
#13 Set sales call agendas actively 48
#14 Stop spending, start investing 49
#15 Trade time for training & trainers 49
#16 Qualify before you let people buy 50
#17 Track sales time to tackle trouble 50
#18 Predictability by people following process 50
#19 Niches are nice, as everybody is nobody 51
#20 Experiment SMART to avoid dumb mistakes 51
2 Validate your market 52
#21 Founder does it first 52
#22 FOMO is not your friend 52
#23 Answer “What’s in for me?” 52
#24 Be specific but not stubborn 53
#25 B2B is H2H – Humans to Humans 53
#26 Predictable pipeline for president 53
#27 Sales is stupid – if your niche works 54
#28 Avoid HiPPOs – Highest Paid Person’s Opinions 54
#29 Craft buyer journeys instead of sales processes 54
#30 Sometimes you win, sometimes you learn, but never lose 55
3 Generate leads 56
#31 Write like you speak 56
#32 Not all leads are equal 56
#33 Trust trumps templates 56
#34 One conversion at a time 57
#35 Pick up the damn phone 57
#36 OCTA: One Call To Action 57
#37 Speak like your customers 58
#38 Write for one person – at scale 58
#39 Validate first, automate second 58
#40 Play where your customers play 59

4 Close more deals faster 60
#41 Trust trumps technology 60
#42 Ask for a no before you go 60
#43 The money is in the follow-up 60
#44 Coach your champion to close 61
#45 Mutual Action Plans Make Money 61
#46 Start with SMBs, elevate to enterprise 61
#47 MEDDICC is not a doctor - but healthy 62
#48 Stop selling costs, start letting people invest 62
#49 Closing is caused by consistent communication 63
#50 Thank people for investing in them and trust in you 63
5 Build a great sales team 64
#51 Train to retain 64
#52 Hire (& fire) for attitude 64
#53 VP Sales not= VP Sales 64
#54 Selling the sales position 65
#55 If it's not hell yeah, it is no 65
#56 Aspire to build the A-Team 66
#57 Hire like you sell, but better 66
#58 Curate collaborative competition 66
#59 If you don't know what you want, don't hire 67
#60 Sales pays salaries, but if it doesn't do so 3-6x, stop 67
6 Build customer success 68
#61 Value what works 68
#62 Track your track record 68
#63 Challenge churn constantly 68
#64 Raving customers refer happily 69
#65 Care & cheer for your customers 69
#66 "Fire" customers who are not a fit 69
#67 Hunters and farmers are different 70
#68 Invest into long-term relationships 70
#69 Do what you say, say what you will do 70
#70 A company should be a Happy Customer Factory 71
7 Learn from the best 72
#71 Reading has raving returns 72
#72 There is no point in dying slowly 72
#73 Learn in minutes instead of weeks 72
#74 No startup died of too little advice 73
#75 Strive for status alignment 73
#76 Execute in hours instead of months 73
#77 Learn from recorded conversations 74

#78 World-class competitors have coaches 74
#79 Don't play status game with status people 74
#80 There is no point of being average in sales 75
8 Closing thoughts 76
#81 Life is not a zero sum game. 76
#82 Money is only keeping score. 76
#83 Give first what you want to get later. 76
#84 Being successful is hard. Being unsuccessful is harder. 77
BONUS: 25 Tactical B2B Sales Insights 78
Implement 5 Quick Wins within 48 hours at EUR 0 investment 78
Sell Innovative Offerings Better 78
Consider Local Specifics for Outbound Sales in DACH 79
Avoid losing prospects by being "ghosted" 79
Negotiate better by framing the conversation 80
The End... but Still and Always Day 1 82

PROLOGUE
How we got here in the first place

In my 30s, I committed to helping B2B founders build and scale sales from 0 to 20 million euros ARR.

But let's take a step back. Actually, let's go back in time to more than a decade ago.

I never radiated with confidence when asking people for their money. I was not a "cool kid" in school and had no serious romantic relationships until university. I lacked the confidence to sell myself. It thus took me 10 years after my first sales job to found my own first company, SalesPlaybook, which started in 2019.

Looking back, it is easy to tell the story that I started in sales back in 2009. In those days I was working in door-to-door sales. I am convinced that I would not be with my amazing wife Miriam without that job.

It was a job everybody frowns upon in Switzerland, even seasoned salespeople. Essentially, it is cold calling 200 people. Every day. Face to face. I was 20 years old with no previous sales experience.

But this job did teach me something. I learnt that a "no" – or 195 to 197 "no's" out of every 200 – does not kill you. After some time – after a week of up to 1,000 pitches – they barely bothered me anymore. Those three to five "deals" per day felt great. With this, I could earn 4,000 euros a month while getting an applied MBA in Public Speaking & Human Psychology.

Of course, there were setbacks. There were days in the rain when I met 50 people or less and didn't sign up any of them. I was wet, drained and unhappy. Every Monday, I thought, "What am I doing here, asking people I don't know to spend money on something they don't know or need?"

That feeling went away after those first 10 or so conversations every Monday, especially after the first pleasant one. I started to separate outcomes from the process and began investing in the process.

So, what did I get from eight weeks "on the street"? About 8,000 euros of self-

earned money in cash. But I also earned something invaluable – the confidence to charm anyone in the world without anxiety or fear of their response.

Why am I convinced I would not be together with the girl of my dreams today without sales?

The official story of how Miriam and I met is "at university, studying". The real story is actually when I tapped her on her shoulder and asked, "Quick question, where are you going?" and taking it from there.

11 years later, we are still together. And "Quick question" is still one of the best subject lines of a cold email. Because it is a natural way of opening a conversation.

But I'm getting ahead of myself here, so read on.

It still puzzles me today how founders try to sell to companies and not people. Every time I tried "hacking" something with a technique, trick or shortcut, it fired back.

For instance, in that first sales job in 2009, I increased my closed deals by an amazing 50-75% during my fifth and sixth weeks on the job. I thought I had "mastered it". Far from it. The rate of people not even paying their first invoice increased by 80-100%, so I in fact performed worse.

So, why do I tell you this story?

Your job is to figure out Product-Market-Fit and get traction before running out of money. 90% of startups unfortunately fail at that. The reason for commercial failure is NOT that your product is not great or that you have not worked hard to succeed.

It is the inability to grow revenues and gain market traction as promised to investors. This happens if you either fail to attract, win or keep enough customers at a steady rate.

But Switzerland does not have the sales culture and mindset you can find in North America. B2B Sales is not a skill you learn at university or in consulting. This makes it extremely hard to find great sales talents who can think and also execute like founders.

After four years at a great business university and three years in consulting, I joined a Swiss VC-backed AI startup as their first business employee. I knew a few things about sales after door-to-door selling for an NGO. And from helping to sell the last Tesla Roadsters in Switzerland in those early Tesla days. And from selling high-ticket deals at Accenture.

I figured out that B2B tech sales in a startup is incredibly different to those with a big brand. Accenture, Tesla and so on had a customer base and extensive sales materials. A startup does not have these resources, making it much harder to get the job done than for a large company.

Together with the founder and CEO, I established the new Onedot brand from scratch, and launched it on the market in 2017. I also helped to transform the company from a project-based service to a product-centred subscription model. As a consequence, revenue has increased by 260% in less than two years. Today, the startup is making a seven-figure revenue. But I could have done things a lot more intelligently, much quicker, and with less pain.

I do not promise you a “Magic Potion” with this book to “Learn B2B Sales in X days to grow from 0 to 20 Million ARR in Y months”.

However, what I do promise you are two things:

Part A: 25 no-bullshit, actionable, time-tested recipes to avoid common B2B sales myths. These will help you avoid trial and error on a strategic level by knowing what to do instead.

Part B: 84 micro-scripts to quickly go from 0 to 20 million euros ARR. These will help you and your sales team with hands-on, proven, no bullshit, tactical advice.

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Part A: B2B Sales Myths Debunked

0-10k: Closing your first deal

A lot of businesspeople at the helm of startups think that if they sell their vision Elon Musk-style early on, they will succeed. This is wrong. In the beginning, you should never shove your ideas down your customer's throat. In fact, you should never do this at all! Instead, balance finding the customers to buy your product, entering partnerships, and getting market feedback.

Verify that each development step is adding value. Let your first customers decide what the first commercial product generation looks like.

But product-market-fit goes beyond that. You are not going to sell if you cannot help your clients to increase revenue, decrease costs or reduce risk. Your job as a startup founder is to figure out product-market-fit and gain market traction before running out of money. Most founders unfortunately fail here.

Finding product-market-fit is not the same as sales in an established company. Before you can launch to close your first 10 customers, you need to figure out a solid business model. From there, you can build a track record and high trust in your target market.

1. Build it and they will come

I know because I failed here with the initial SalesPlaybook app in 2019. I invested 15k euros of my own money to provide "a vitamin, not a painkiller." The app got 100 sign-ups in under 14 days, but no revenue. The product was nice to have, but not a must. And I made this mistake despite teaching a Design Thinking class to over 200 students.

Product cycle of death: Building more will not lead to selling more

No startup ever died of too little "advice". Everybody and their grandmother will have an opinion on what you should be. What you should build. How you should sell. And many other things you can't even contemplate yet.

There is a huge difference in the value of feedback from people paying you and those who are not. People will tell you "Your product is amazing, and I would buy it if only it had that feature." Words walk, money talks. Ask for their commitment

to sign a customer agreement if you commit to providing the feature.

If people put their money where their mouth is and the feature is the missing essential ingredient for them to commit, they will. In the other 90% or more of cases, they will not.

Which is great. This way, you avoid building things you don't want for people who don't get enough value from it. They will not wire money to your bank account for it.

Nobody waited for you. Few people will buy on their own

Jordan Belfort ("The Wolf of Wall Street") got many things wrong in his life. But one thing he got right is that every person has both an action and pain threshold. If the pain threshold hits a trigger and the action threshold is low enough ("Make it easy to buy!"), only then a deal will close.

No one wakes up with the thought, "Let me invest my focus, time and energy to evaluate an offer less than 10 customers have purchased before. And then commit on the spot."

People need at least two touch points to your offer before committing to it. Closing six-figure deals often involves seven active(!) stakeholders.

It is YOUR job to make the buyer's journey as easy as possible. You do this through hard work.

It is YOUR responsibility that the customer is able to buy from you.

It is NEVER the customer who is "too stupid, too busy, too unfocused" to buy from you.

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Sell first, build the RIGHT thing, sell more of the same thing

If you sell an offer you're confident you can provide but have not built it yet, you use the revenue to build it. If you build an offer you're confident you can sell but have not sold yet, you go bankrupt.

This of course excludes external funding which has its own challenges.

You might think now that sales do not fix everything. True. But they do fix a lot of things.

When it comes to fundraising, five to 10 deals (in the same niche) will grease your seed round, and 1 million euros ARR will grease your Series A.

Top entrepreneurial talent wants to work in a rocket ship with market traction.

Customer testimonials build trust and make it easier to assess your credibility. Happy customers are your best salespeople.

Once you build a solution which makes two to 10 customers happy, don't build other things.

Focus on finding 20 to 100 customers with the same use case and profile as your customer base. Dig deep into your proven offer to make it so valuable that it becomes "an offer they can't refuse".

2. I'm not yet selling

Every job application is (trying) to make a sale. I have applied for jobs since I was 14 years old. Actually, I started even younger, selling Pro Juventute post stamps in primary school.

You are always selling. By being an early-stage entrepreneur, you engage in "the purest form of sales". This is because you do not have marketing, case studies, processes, referrals, technology and products in place. You have yourself and, maybe, one to five people.

Your success depends on if you can convince a person to invest in you. Because, at this point, your business is you.

Startup "sales" is ⅓ business model, ⅓ go-to-market and ⅓ sales

I worked with over 200 B2B founders. I also had conversations with three to five times that number of people who did not become customers.

"They will first raise funding, then hire people, then build, and then start selling." "Our business plan says we will go from 0 to 1 million ARR in less than 12 months, hit two to four million ARR the year after and 20 million ARR in less than X years."

Unfortunately, I can count on one hand the number of times this worked in Switzerland. There are Silicon Valley "role models" that achieved those unbelievable metrics. But also after raising $10 to 100 million in funding. If you have less than that, start selling as early as possible.

Zero pipeline today might mean zero sales in the next three to six months

Sales forecasting is difficult. But sales people rarely close more deals faster than expected. And they never appear from nowhere. We as homo sapiens are terrible at understanding the dependency of time.

Some say on Sunday morning, "I will never drink again." We forget that never is a long time, and in fact, by Friday the world looks different.

People think how the sale is going to close in two months if everything works as planned. The problem is that life gets in the way. People don't call you back or are on vacation. New stakeholders, competitors, regulatory hurdles, IT, Compliance, Procurement, Finance, and Legal enter the picture. And your champion might leave the company.

Many founders feel pressure to commit to hitting 1 million euros in Annual Recurring Revenue by the end of the year. Even if they are at 500k and it is July. And their average sales cycle is six to nine months, and their pipeline is not even

unweighted 500k.

Being realistic in startup sales sucks. But it is 100% necessary for survival.

So, either figure out how to cut your sales cycles in half, which is impossible.

Or start filling your sales pipeline with SQLs (Sales Qualified Leads). Every working day. Please start today. Now. Put this book aside until you have booked at least one call.

Revenue is the primary driver of value creation

Customers, employees and investors tell you they care about your vision and you as a person. True if you are doing well with both. To a certain extent.

But customers want to be sure you will still be around to support them in five years.

Employees want to get paid. In cash. If in equity, they want to work at a place that's going to be successful.

Investors want you to triple your valuation, or ten times it even, and if VCs (Venture Capitalists), times it by 30 or 100 within seven to 10 years.

Upon seven-digit revenues, your valuation is a multiple of your annual revenue.

Great revenues let you get away with bad storytelling. But great storytelling does not let you get away with lack of revenue over time.

3. Fundraise first, sales later

"We will do a bridge funding round that's going to close within six to eight weeks." In other words: the startup failed to generate enough traction and will run out of money within that timeframe.

Stories are OK, traction is good, financial independence is great

"The slave of two masters is a free man." You might think this if you have two investors with opposing opinions. There might be one thing all your board members and investors can agree on. It is that the more sales, the better as it drives their status and financial ROI.

As long as you are dependent on investors, they will tell you what to do, not the other way around. Generate enough cash. When you are able to thrive without them, you earned yourself a lot more freedom.

Why customer money is worth multiple that of investor money

Money from customers is worth so much more than any other money. Customers help you validate your market. Customers give you constructive feedback for your product. Customers provide testimonials. Customers refer you. Customers give you trust in the market. Customers help you to attract top talent. Customers might give you more money in the future if you deliver what you sold them.

Customers help you get investors. On your terms, with less effort.

Show me your sales and I'll show you the investors and terms you can get

Right now, in June 2021, there is too much money for too few great founders. The money needs to go somewhere. The best investors still get the greatest deals. Make sure you have one of these deals. Because where great investors flock, others will follow.

The faster you finish fundraising, the sooner you can get "back to business" and re-invest the 30-50% of time the CEO spent on this to win more customers. This makes fundraising a lot easier.

4. Product-driven growth is the way to go

How much do you pay for YouTube? Nothing? But it is a great product, isn't it!?

Fine. Once you know the product to build that drives growth

Slack started as a gaming app. Uber started as an internal app. Facebook came into being because Mark Zuckerberg had social needs. Be hyper-critical as if you would need your product yourself.

And be sure that 10 to 100 other companies need your product as well. Need, as in willing to commit you to a 5-50% upfront payment if you promise to provide the solution within three to six months.

Money talks. Words walk

You don't know what your product is worth until somebody pays for it. In cash. From their own budget. Everybody will tell you how amazing your technology, idea, team, brand is. Then it should be a no-brainer for them to put their money where their mouth is and invest 5-50k euros in your solution. If not, they will at least introduce you to two to five decision makers who need your solution. Now.

That rarely happens. Because commitment is different to words. Even try to give somebody the value of 5-50k euros for free. Give them a 100% money-back guarantee. And tell them that you double their investment if they are not happy with your offer.

Now you might ask, "But what if my product does not deliver? Isn't there a huge risk for me?"

That's true. But let me ask you: if you don't believe 100% in your product, why should the customer?

Product-driven growth is expensive

Product-driven means you let people use your product without selling them something. Which means you do not get money for it. But as the product should sell itself, the product experience needs to be great. Building amazing, scalable products is expensive.

Make sure you have deep pockets to build an amazing product without relying too much on cashflow. If you have a ton of cash, build it and commit to product-driven growth. But don't expect all your users to become customers. Instead, it will be only a fraction of them, around 2-10%.

5. Incubators / Accelerators will teach me B2B sales

I've had over 30 B2B working sessions with incubators and accelerators. I didn't try this many because they were bad. No, they are great at what they do and also offer help to fill in gaps in their services.

Reality says no. Because they are not built for that

Most people running incubator and accelerator programs are not founders themselves.

People running these programs are putting corporates' money to good use. They position these partnerships close to the participating founders. They do this to help them scout great talent, technology and traction from the beginning.

These programs typically take two to six months. B2B sales cycles often take six to 24 months from first contact to company-wide roll-out. The goal of these programs are often "PoCs" – Proof of Concepts.

B2B sales is not about proofing concepts. It is about solving real-world, operational problems for customers. And getting 10-50% of the invested financial means as revenue for solving the problem.

Fix sales BEFORE you join to get maximum value

Incubators and accelerators are a great opportunity for accelerated trust building. The program introducing you to a corporate is much better than your cold outreach.

But do you have your discovery questions, case studies and buyer journey ready? More than 80% of founders I meet say, "It would have been amazing if we had been ready for these meetings. We then would have closed two to three deals instead of still discussing when to start with a Proof of Concept (PoC)."

No startup ever died of too little feedback

Everybody will have an opinion on what you should do next. Incubators and accelerators do their best to give you experts and advisors. I know because I've been on that side as well. But the reality is: you do not need 20 more answers to questions you did not ask. You need to ask smarter questions.

If you have those smart questions and get the answers you're looking for – great! If you have a proven professional asking you very specific questions you did not know you need to ask, that's great as well! But focus on finding and asking questions, not answers.

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https://www.thesalesplaybook.com/bookacall

10-100k: Selling – and invoicing(!) your first 100k

"Opportunity is vanity, revenue is sanity, and cash is reality."

Congratulations. You have sold your first deal and "crossed the vanity chasm". Many founders say their first signed deal was the best feeling throughout their whole career.

But most small businesses go bankrupt because of cash flow issues. Five months after I started SalesPlaybook, I hit my first-year bookings target of 75,000 euros. I "reported to my angel investor" (aka telling my wife) that I hit my annual target. And that I would be going on vacation for a few months (only joking of course, I was hungry as f*** to build the business!).

She congratulated me with a smile and asked a question nobody discusses in "Startup Porn": "That's great. But how many invoices have you sent? How much money did you receive?"

My humbled answer was zero and zero. I had worked for five months and did not pay myself a salary. Part of me thought I had hit my target, but I had nothing to show for my hard work.

Understanding time, conversion and fundamentals on financials early on is of utmost importance.

6. I have enough leads from my network

The average SalesPlaybook customer is a founder and CEO in his or her 30s. He or she left a successful consulting, industry or academic career at a Top 10 player in their field. All have a great reputation in their ecosystem. But even McKinsey Alumni realise this is not enough to go from zero to 10 customers.

Your professional network is (typically) not your Ideal Customer Profile

A man is searching for something under a lamp post at night.
A passer-by asks him what he's searching for. "My keys," the man says.
The passer-by asks where the man lost them. "Over there," the man says.
The passer-by asks why he's looking here if he lost them over there.
The man replies, "Because I can see better here."

If you're laughing out loud about how stupid the man is, please stop.
Your professional network is the light in the story. It is bright there and searching is easy.

But after having a good laugh, why not look for the keys where you think you lost them?

Lead generation needs to be predictable and repeatable.
Your network is a somewhat "one and done" exercise for that.

I know because I went through my LinkedIn network of then over 3,000 contacts at the start of SalesPlaybook. I selected the 20% of interesting profiles for my

company mission. I then reached out to the top 2% to gather feedback. It is a great exercise to reach low-hanging fruit, so do that.

But after four weeks, you're done. Move on and think about how you can reach 100 customers with a repeatable market offering. These customers buy from you because the problem you solve is important and urgent for them. They are the right people to take action. Not because they like you and want to help.

"I have a large network" is the lamest pitch of any salesperson

Some sales candidates answer the question "How are you going to build up your sales funnel?" with "I have a large network." Put them on a commission-only contract or call bullshit on that.

If they are coming from your competitor, often they will not be able to poach their former client base to become your customers. This would be illegal, immoral and not even possible for them.

Ask them what they will do once they worked on "their large network". Find out if their fundamentals are rock-solid. And if they will be able to prospect, drive and close deals even in a completely different market.

Predictable revenue comes from repeatable outbound sales

Inbound leads are great. I am not going to argue here for once.

Inbounds are further along their buyer journey. Your direct customer acquisition costs have been zero so far. And they might tell you about their problems and willingness to invest without you asking for it.

There is only one problem with inbound leads: they are very hard to predict and repeat. Sometimes they come, sometimes they do not.

But you want to bulletproof your sales engine in a way that you know exactly how much pipeline you are going to generate in the next quarter. Independent of luck, trends and other unpredictable factors.

Which is why I recommend investing in outbound prospecting from Day 1 and keep at it forever.

Confirm which channel works best for you. If this is email, LinkedIn, phone calls or TikTok, it does not matter as long as it's working. Predictably, repeatably, independent of you as the CEO.

7. Deals will close within weeks

80% of companies die due to cashflow because money is going out the door faster than the Cash Conversion Cycle accelerates. Speed is of the essence.

Trust drives speed. Case studies, credibility and authority build trust

PoCs can destroy speed. Business cases can destroy speed. PowerPoint can destroy speed.

Because they force people to increase their action threshold.

What drives speed is trust. Clients need to trust you, the company, the product,

and the market to take a buying decision. Start with your credibility.

Your credibility builds upon your intent, your integrity, your capabilities and your results.

People feel if your intent is not genuine, if you see them only as "a deal", they "feel your commission-breath". People discover your integrity if you say one thing and do another. The world is becoming ever smaller. Any bullshit you tell is only one reference call away. This is not to scare you, but for you to think your sales career as a life-long endeavour, not a quarterly quota.

Do people trust you that you are capable of solving their problem? Do they trust in your product? Do they trust in the market that you actually solved the problem before?

Customer testimonials with proven bottom-line impact are your best sales arguments here. If in doubt, discuss one to three customer-specific case studies and have zero PowerPoint slides. Never use PowerPoint without social proof. You might not yet have real, documented, authorised success stories to use. But still tell your story along a use case on what a customer will experience when working with you.

When you get "pushed into the PoC corner", reply that you'd love to set up a reference call with a customer instead. From there, start creating operational value right away. Be confident enough to offer the customer a 100% action-based money-back guarantee. Your trust in your offering will translate to the customer, both ways. If you're not confident to offer reference calls or risk reversals, go back to fix your offering.

Everything always takes longer than expected

Your internal sales process takes two to three weeks. The buyer journey you mapped takes two to three months. But please be well aware that your offering is tying into a larger initiative with the client. This might be political, they're not in a hurry, or had their funding cancelled. And it can thus take ages.

Rarely does a customer call you to say, "I received an extra 100k euro budget and would love to start immediately." This could happen only if the end of their fiscal year is nearing. And they need to get rid of some money to get the same budget next year again. In this case, strike without mercy, get a deal done even without the exact scope and celebrate.

But always plan for the first case. Because five-figure deals typically take three to six months, six-figure deals six to 18 months and seven-figure deals even longer.

My coach once said, "You cannot make a sales cycle shorter – but you can make it longer." At first, I did not understand what he meant. I then realised that in today's buyer-centric world, our job as a salesperson is no longer to "present our offering" (never, ever present!). Instead, it's to help the buyer make an informed decision by helping them to navigate THEIR world. Today, we have stopped trying to bring them into our world.

SMBs first, corporates second

The majority of successful businesses I know started out with SMBs – Small and Medium Businesses. They move much faster and have a lower cluster risk. They also have less complex customised requirements. In most cases, they are glad

to serve as references for case studies, webinars or reference calls.

This not to say corporates are not attractive clients. But be realistic that corporate buyers have by their nature a higher risk aversion. This is the way a corporate ladder works as the impact on the whole business is much higher if things go wrong.

A strategy I have seen working well countless times is to mix things up. Establish an active SMB pipeline with the intent to close deals this and next quarter. But keep "updating" corporates about your progress. This way corporates see that your offering is getting better every time they see you. Once you hit a critical number of customers and case studies in their ecosystem, they will work with you.

8. I don't need a CRM, it's all in my head

A CRM is like sleep. You can go without it for quite a while and skip steps. But, if you do, you will pay dearly for it. You also do not need a bespoke box-spring bed (aka Salesforce Unlimited with add-ons) to make things happen.

Your head is great. But you want to build a business, right?

There's a thing called "bus risk". If you get hit by a bus, what happens? Investors, banks and others want you to buy insurance because they don't want the business to be dependent on you. But that's exactly what it is if the company is in your head, email, on Excel spreadsheets and sketches in your notebook.

Which is why you need to make a conscious decision if you want to be a freelancer or build a seven- or even eight-figure business. Even if you are a freelancer, get a lean CRM and save yourself some time and even more headaches.

If you do not do this, going on longer vacations, delegating processes and handing over relationships is not workable. Or at least a lot harder than if your brain was available to others.

Get a CRM for free, in less than two hours, with no technical background

A myth in the sense of concern (or excuse) not to take action is that "a CRM is too expensive for us". Cut it and save me the tears. You can start for free with HubSpot. Pipedrive starts at $12 a month, Salesforce is currently at $25 as of writing. If you need to think about investing up to $500 to set your business up for scale, you're in the wrong business.

Another myth is that you need to be technical to setup a CRM. I've been a certified Salesforce Admin for over four years and agree it can be a bit of a beast sometimes. Nothing prevents you from getting a basic CRM, email and calendar sync, automating schedules for meetings and adding your five to 10 most-used templates. This is workable in less than two hours. Now go and do it, start small, then build from there.

Start with fundamentals, get quick wins, go from there

"Implementing a CRM seems like a huge project." Yes, but only if you make it one. I know because I co-led two large Salesforce Quote-to-Cash transformations where, in one, the client paid over 900k and, in the other, over 2M in the end.

This is because they had complex business processes, over 50 users, tons of exceptions and more.

I understand you're still working towards hitting 1 million euros in annual revenue and thus do NOT have over 50 people in your organisation. So, don't copy corporates. Start with the out-of-the-box setup, keep complexity low, configure only what you need, do not customize if not necessary.

And if you need your CRM to talk to other systems, Zapier and your CRM marketplace gets you a long way before custom integrations.

9. My network is enough to find product-market-fit

I started SalesPlaybook with a network of over 3,000 LinkedIn connections and was part of the HSG, Tesla and Accenture Alumni network. Only one out of my first 20 clients came from that community. I am much happier to provide friends with an amazing product now than to show very little in the beginning.

Again. Your network is NOT enough to find product-market-fit

I know, I know, we talked about this before. But let's do it again. Because by now you've closed some deals from your network, and you think you're on the right track towards product-market-fit.

I know 10-year-old scale-ups that surpassed 5 million ARR (having fluctuated from 7-8 million), that still have no idea which industry, buyer persona and use case works best for them. Which is why they still struggle with lead generation, conversions and profitability.

Find 500 people with the same demographics, challenges and objectives

In the 2010s, you hit up the phone book and called around. You went to networking events to find people that wanted your product or service.

It's 2021 now. LinkedIn Sales Navigator is helping you filter from more than 700 million people to a niche profile of 100 to 500 with the same demographics. Tools like ocean.io or Owler help you find Lookalike companies within minutes instead of days. Yes, these tools cost you 80 to 300 euros per month. But if finding product-market-fit is a thing for you, that's money well spent.

Either way, ask your existing customers for referrals, groups, chats, and events where they and their colleagues hang around. Get more from these similar customers instead of pursuing a "spray and pray" approach. Stop shouting "we need to do more of the same, even if it is not working!"

Be real about your unit economics and conversions

Your unit economics from the past lie to you about what your unit economics of the future will look like.

Going from zero to 10 paying customers is hard. It's much harder than to go from 10 to 50. Five-figure deals from your network might close much quicker than "cold" leads as your contact has built a lot of the trust already.

Invest in understanding your sales cycles, deal sizes and customer acquisition costs without making things complicated.

Let's take Customer Acquisition Costs (CAC) as an example. Start with a Google Sheet and assign yourself an internal hourly rate of 100 euros. Make four columns: one each for emails, calls, meetings and offers, and fill in the hours spent per Closed/Won deal. I know this does not incorporate time on Closed/Lost deals and channel metrics, but at least it works to raise awareness.

10. Channel sales will fix market traction

I went through more than 100 emails, over 25 hours worked, more than 10 calls and one physical workshop with SAP Hybris as "the potential was huge – we could get 300 customers in one niche if this works!" I ended up with zero customers, zero revenue and even zero time in front of SAP Hybris customers out of this.

Channel partners have day jobs. If shit hits the fan, you don't matter

People are egoistic, irrational creatures. Sorry to break it to you, but that's the way we are. Survive and procreate. Channel partners are consisting of people with a day job. They survive and procreate if they do their day job well and stay focused. Which means not taking away valuable time from their day job (surviving) and from their family (procreating).

If you can't sell your product, nobody else can – or will

"There's a huge opportunity for channel partners to make tons of money from selling your product." Sure thing. But how easy is it to sell your product? Has nobody other you ever sold it? You didn't do it 10 times this quarter? Then I am out. Because this looks like tons of hard work without a guaranteed reward or any of your equity upside.

Come back once I can make an email intro for you and in two out of three cases, a deal closes, and I get a four-digit amount from that email.

Don't be stingy with referral fees and incentives. Invest in your partners

Which gets us to one of my favourite founder questions: "How much must we pay partners for selling our solution? Around 3% or 5%?" W.T.F.! If I love your product after benefitting from it myself, I will refer you no matter what. But if we're talking money, don't focus too much on cutting the cake. Focus on making a big cake. So, try 10-15% for qualified introductions and 15-25% for co-selling with you until the signed deal.

Oh, and before I forget: don't sign lifetime referral contracts. Investors don't like them. Your CFO will not like them. Appreciate the work and trust a partner puts in you. Make it a one-, two-, three-year referral deal. But no lifetime deals. Because life is long.

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https://www.thesalesplaybook.com/bookacall

100k-1 Million: Closing 10 deals in a niche

So, when will you know if you reached product-market-fit? Nobody will tell you, "You reached 98% product-market-fit." And there will be no bells and whistles ringing.

Europe bolsters a strong innovation culture. Switzerland is even the world's most innovative country by the World International Patent Organization's (WIPO) ranking. The same is not true for its sales culture which is vastly different and arguably less developed compared to North America. B2B Sales is not a subject you learn about in school, at university, in society and even at most companies. This makes it extremely hard to find great sales talents who think and execute like founders.

This leaves you with a few options as a founder:

Option A) You try to do everything yourself. But you are already juggling strategy, product development, admin, hiring and fundraising.

Option B) You hire a senior sales guy for 150,000 euros per year who knows his stuff. But that person is rarely as hungry and hands-on as you need that early employee to be.

Option C) You hire an affordable junior sales guy who is hungry and hands-on. But without support, that person will struggle to ramp-up sales and set your company up for scale.

I know a handful of founders who sold 1 million euros annual revenue all by themselves. So, option A) is workable, but hard and rare to work out. And the longer you execute the day-to-day sales activities yourself, the longer it will take you to reach scalability.

From my experience, option B) is difficult and risky. In a startup, you are hiring not just for sales skills, but also for entrepreneurial skills and attitude. This much needed "fire" and "hunger" to build with the founders is hard to find in combination with over 10 years of sales expertise. Not to mention the lack of financial resources required to attract these colleagues.

So, what about Option C)? People can learn, practice and succeed in sales. Unlike neurobiology or quantum physics, people can learn sales within months, not years. You "only" need to make sure you equip this young hungry talent with the right support to boost work quickly. But are you already at the point where hiring your first full-time salesperson makes sense?

Let's review five common B2B sales myths at this revenue stage.

11. I know what the customer wants

Even if you do… everybody hates an upfront "Know-It-All". The same is true for "Told you so".

Let me simplify. Seek to understand before being understood.

Prescription without diagnosis is malpractice. Doctors lose their license for that

Doctors are amazing salespeople. The bad ones prescribing you something without your consent and buy-in can go to jail because they need to make you aware of the potential consequences of taking a medication or undergoing surgery.

There is a reason why you don't say to your doctor, "Let me discuss this internally and get back to you. Then I might do a Proof of Concept. Then I might negotiate with you. Then I might not get back to you." The reason why is that the doctor diagnoses you first and only then follows up with a prescription.

You have two ears and a mouth. There's a good reason for this. Seek to understand before being understood. Listen first. Then ask smart questions. Then ask follow-up questions. Then rephrase if you understood everything. Ask more questions if necessary.

Then share the general options you see that could help the other person or team. Get feedback if they see the world the same way. Only then think about pitching and "prescribing" your solution.

Stop selling, let people buy. Think buyer journey, not sales process

The world is becoming ever more buyer-centric. Buyers are better informed today than even five years ago. They have up to 50 data points about your offering and ecosystem before you even see them. The good news is that this saves you a lot of required pitching time and demos. The bad news is that most salespeople are still very "demo-centric". Even website CTAs (Call To Actions) say, "Book a demo. Get a demo."

People don't want demos. If they want presentations, they watch a movie and grab a beer.

People want to understand and check if you 1) understand, 2) can and 3) will solve their problems without them spending a fortune and jumping through hoops to make it happen.

This is why your job is not to "push" an offering down people's throats whatever it takes. Instead, you help them make an informed decision. When entering five- and six-figure deals, you will have two to 10 stakeholders involved. This is not only a lot of work for you, but also for your buyer!

It's 2021, not the "Roaring 80s of ABC – Always Be Closing"

Sales in the last century used to be a lot of large "one-off" transactions. Enterprise sales meant to lock-in seven- or even eight-figure deals and then "be done" for good because it was more or less a one-off transaction in value in exchange for money. Which often locked the customer in for years.

That has changed. We now live in a subscription economy. Even Enterprise Software like Salesforce can start with a four- or five-figure deal. If people want to change providers because their problem is not solved, they will.

Which is why "Always Be Closing" can ruin your reputation as a sales professional. "AUA" sales – "Anhauen - Umhauen - Abhauen" – is a bad idea today. Because you will get zero customer lifetime value beyond the initial deal. Zero referrals and zero testimonials. But 100% churn as soon as it's possible for the client.

In 2021, B2B sales is about building trust and lasting relationships so your sales efforts compound over time. If you close an initial 10k deal, that deal can often lead to 100k and two referrals to clients with the same use case and similar revenue potential. 250k in revenue from one customer. Focus on adding value and helping people make informed decisions and build from there.

12. It's time to sell big tickets to corporates

"We have nine months of runway before running out of cash. We have greatconversations with 10 enterprise prospects. And if only one or two of them close, we will be fine and even ready to raise our Series A."

Big tickets take big time – duration and time investment

The problem is that large corporations rarely invest 100k or more with you within nine months after the initial conversation. Even if they do, they often have payment terms of at least 60 days. Which means adding another two to four months to the nine to 18-month enterprise sales cycle. Even if you close five enterprise deals like the one above, you will have no money after nine months. And go out of business if no other sources of income are available.

I am not advocating against selling to enterprises in principle. But you need to understand the Cash Conversion Cycle from lead to opportunity (two to three months) to booking (three to eight months). And then to revenue (two to three months) to cash (two to four months), which is crucial for your survival.

Big corporates love letting others trying and failing or succeeding first

"We could do great things together," the founder and CEO said to the Buyer Persona at a big corporate. Both people are aware that if they do, it means a huge deal for that founder and CEO, and a side-project for the buyer. If nothing happens, the founder and CEO has sleepless nights. The buyer continues with life.

The thing is: corporates have existed long before you existed and have been (mostly) fine. They did not wait for you to call them. They might have tried fixing the problem you fixed. But it was either unimportant, not urgent, or not workable enough for them. Or they failed big time with one of your competitors. And they are now "burnt" to trust the solution approach you're proposing.

Which is why they love case studies. Show them three to five cases where you solved the problem for somebody else. Let them talk to these customers to confirm their understanding. Then let them commit to working with you. If you don't yet have these case studies, build them with smaller customers first where needed.

Don't be(come) dependent on one or two big customers

Power balance matters. Corporates might play "status games" with you to establish they are Alpha and you are Beta because of their status on a global scale. But to be successful in sales, you need to get "Local Alpha Status" in your domain. And avoid being needy at all costs (more on that in the book "Pitch Anything" by Oren Klaff).

The thing is: if a customer brings in more than, let's say, 30% of your revenue, he has leverage over you. Because if they then work with somebody else in the market, they would be 100% fine. But you are 30% short of income, which would destroy your growth plans and cash in the bank. And impair your freedom to operate your business. And they know it.

Which is why 10 100k deals are much better than one 1 million deal.

13. It's time to hire VP Sales

I had the honour of interviewing a VP Sales candidate for a Swiss scale-up. The candidate looked promising with over four years in the industry and more than 20 years sales experience. But he spent 40 out of 60 minutes talking about how he led the sales team and how he sees sales working. He asked no questions even after I asked him three times if he had any, to which he said no. I then asked him if he sees himself as an elephant (has big ears for listening) or a lion (has a big mouth for talking). "An elephant of course - let me tell you about it...!"

A VP Sales leads three to 10 salespeople.
Do you have three to 10 salespeople?

If you have that number of salespeople before you hit 250k annual revenue, you are either backed by a VC who tells you "Burn my money, growth at all costs!" Or you are very ambitious that they will scale your business to the moon. Or stupid because they cost you more than you can generate in revenue, and you will go bankrupt.

I am confident you are not stupid at all and do not have three to 10 salespeople yet. Which is why it is NOT time to hire a traditional "Mr. Dashboard" VP Sales yet. Hire an Account Executive if you have enough leads to find one. 80% of founders at this stage don't have consistent, predictable leads coming in. In this case hire a Sales Development Representative to fill the pipeline.

There are 48 types of VP Sales. Make sure you get the right type

Jason Lemkin put up an amazing free video on why "Mr. Dashboard" is not a great fit for your current stage of business. The misconception here is that a six-figure annual revenue company needs "normal" salespeople that do just that. Sales.

The complication is that you don't yet have product-market-fit. Your market offering and even business model is still changing on a three- to six-month basis. And there is much work that traditional salespeople either do not want or with which they unable to help.

VP Sales are a big investment. Can they add 500k+ in annual revenue?

Sales is about leverage. I recently heard of an Enterprise Sales Executive pocketing $4.5 million in commission(!) from selling a $50 million deal. Which we all want a salesperson to do, no questions asked.

If a salesperson wants to earn $250k per year, you are likely to want that person to bring in about $1 million in annual sales (four times OTE – On Target Earnings). The problem is that the salesperson will most likely be unable to bring in that revenue at your current stage.

Because it would mean growing 400-600% per year just from what that person sold. This is very rarely workable due to product, operations, delivery or technology constraints.

Which is why you are going to either overspend on a "traditional" VP Sales at that stage or disappoint the salesperson as you will not pay $250k if they can bring in only $250-400k.

14. It's time to expand to new verticals

Facebook started with Harvard. Then Ivy League. Then US colleges. Then other colleges.

Airbnb started with the San Francisco Bay Area. Then San Francisco. Then California.

"Going global" sounds great, but make sure you do it only if it makes 100% sense

Focus on a niche. At all times. Then take the next closest niche

Sales should not be a mind-blowing intellectual challenge. But it is if you make it become one, if every sale you attempt is in a different market, buyer persona, buyer journey and use case. Then you will need to jump hoops mentally, commercially and regarding your product every time you try to close a deal

Unfortunately, that is what I see happening all the time. Founders are "big logo hunting", chasing every inbound lead and trying to "Always Be Closing". Because money is always short, ego is there, and the prospect might even ask for the deal. But with this sales "strategy", keep in mind that "your tech startup is a glorified consultancy" as it might apply forever. This is because you are selling and delivering custom, project-based services instead of product-based subscriptions or an otherwise scalable offering.

Therefore, focusing on a niche is, as I see it, the most important, but also most neglected decision to stick with for any successful company.

Expansion is dilution. Dilution kills focus. Focus is your biggest asset

"This is (not) working! We need to conquer new markets now!"

If things are going well, founders strive for expansion. If things are going badly, founders strive for expansion. I have seen this go so far that every person in a company "leads" a different market offering or even business model.

The thing is, you are and will for the foreseeable future be resource-constrained. Too constrained to dilute your efforts on various offerings, geographies or even business models. Focus is one of your biggest assets. Expansion kills focus because you're trying to achieve too many things at once.

Which is why focusing on a niche is, in 90% of cases, the solution to your focus problems. Now, you might object with, "But I don't know which niche I should focus on – how can I be sure I tackle the right one?" That is a great, valid question. But there is a huge difference between validating a niche and taking an informed decision to conquer one.

Expand when you conquer a niche. Until you do, don't

It seems finding a niche and achieving product-market-fit is harder than scaling sales from 500k to 1 million annual revenue. Because the second one is, to a certain extent, doing "more of the same" (crossing the chasm challenge is real!).

Finding product-market-fit is hard because there is often no defined process to it. It might be more individualised in your case than "just" closing 10 more deals in the same niche.

Which is why you should invest a ton of energy into understanding the attractiveness and "readiness" of many niches. Apply advanced lead generation methods and talk to as many potential buyers as possible at the beginning.

Stop selling until you understand the problems in your niche well. Then win five to 10 customers in that niche and create one or two case studies. From there, approach 20 to 50 other companies in that niche. If you can execute this within six to 12 months, it seems like you found an attractive niche.

If not, dig deeper to make an informed decision to see if you are the problem, or if the product is not ready. Or if you are ignorant to existing challenges. Or if trust is not there yet. Then decide if the niche is right for your company.

Only once you have validated your niche, drive expansion to another. Not any niche, but the closest one. Change only one variable such as geography or adjacent industry. For example, investment banks -> private equity firms -> family offices -> hedge funds. NOT automotive and not even insurance.

15. It's time to establish a sales organisation

"I have seven Kalashnikovs (Account Executives), but no ammunition for them," a VP Sales of a 5 million ARR scale-up told me. All but one of their SDRs quit recently. If you must establish an organisation, establish a lead generation engine. Predictable lead generation typically results in predictable revenue. With or without seven Account Executives.

If in doubt, fill the sales funnel

There are tons of problems in B2B sales which kill companies, such as neediness to close a deal or not enough conversations to validate a niche. Or frustrated salespeople that leave because they don't get close enough deals.

Filling your sales funnel often helps to make the above problems disappear. More leads mean less neediness to get one specific deal done. Sales reps have more conversations and learn faster which niches, sales arguments and offerings work or not. Salespeople thrive because they actually close deals and make money.

Sales is also a numbers game to a certain extent. Double the amount of qualified leads and you will typically double your opportunities, new customers, revenue and cash.

"We build shit, and we sell shit and everything else is bullshit"

"Learn how to build. Learn how to sell. If you can do both, you will be unstoppable." This is one my favourite quotes from Naval Ravikant.

It captures the essence of becoming a founder in less words than most people take to introduce themselves.

Most people who give advice to early-stage startups have been or are still working for much larger companies. They need a sales organisation because they have more than 10 salespeople and at least 10 FTEs (full-time employees) overall.

But as a startup, for a while you will not need people whose main job is to keep things organised. You need people who build and sell shit, so you generate enough revenue. This way you build trust with customers and investors if you need them, and there's cashflow to pay salaries and other expenses. And market traction has the biggest potential impact on the mission you set out to achieve

Middle management before 10 FTEs might be too early

Establishing a sales organisation is not contributing to the above. This is because you do not need one yet. Focus on building and selling, and the rest will take care of itself. OK, let's be honest, the CEO aka CFO / COO / VP Product / Head of HR / Head of Problems will take care of itself. Hire managers once you can afford them to enable building and selling more yourself.

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https://www.thesalesplaybook.com/bookacall

1-5 Million: Cross the Chasm

Only 0.5% of all founded businesses ever make 1 million euros in annual revenue

That is one out of 200 of all the people that actually start a company and don't just freelance and talk about "being founders" because they "built" a No-Code App over two weekends. Many founders are also comfortable running their own six-figure lifestyle business, taking a nice salary and some dividends and that's that. Which is perfectly fine.
But since you are reading a book with a title starting with "From 0 to 20 million…", I understand that you are hungry for more.

16. I found product-market-fit

There's no "bells and whistles". But inbound leads tell a lot.

Be honest with yourself if 50% or more of people approaching you have the problem(s) you are solving. If this type of inbound lead ("people coming to you") is increasing over time, you are on the right track. There is no "magic moment" or even a Key Performance Indicator for product-market-fit. You cannot declare that you now, on the 18th June 2021 (as I write these words), hit product-market-fit.

Therefore, your best shot to assess your journey towards product-market-fit are "proxies". Shorter sales cycles, less open questions on "how it works" and higher profitability. Also, more referrals, more customers in the same niche and a decreasing need to individualise your market offering.

Message-market fit leads to product-market-fit

Like it or not, signalling is real. If you want to solve a particular problem, people need to know that you can or will do it. It is great to have message-market-fit, then solve the discussed problem. Much better for sure than building a product without a validated market first. And then announcing how many great features it has.

Therefore, you should embrace overarching principles like focusing all of your messaging. Focus first on the solved challenges (WHY) and "What's in for the customer" (WHAT). Only then, move onto what exactly it is that you do in your company (HOW).

Because no customer cares about the HOW if the WHY and the WHAT are not crystal clear. I worked with at least 10 AI (Artificial Intelligence) startups. Seven or eight of them removed "the AI pitch" from the conversation after a while and focused on the solved problem and the buyer journey without "talking technology".

I recommend starting right now to adapt your messaging. Open your LinkedIn profile, edit your tagline and remove the typical "Role X at Company Y" (HOW). Then replace it with the WHY + WHAT. A structure that works is "I help <customer profile> to achieve <target result x> with <your mechanism z>." Glad to give you an example here: "I help committed B2B founders hit product-market fit and build sales faster."

Build a "cookie-cutter". B2B sales is ideally zero intellectual work

A "cookie-cutter" refers to the part of a factory conveyor belt that cuts cookies. It cuts every cookie the same way, every day, at scale, in never-ending high quality.

That is what you want your sales to look like. Running Proof of Concepts with different use cases and a lot of inputs for your product roadmap is stimulating. But not an efficient use of resources at all.

Which is why you need to move on from the consulting model. "Tell me your problem, I will tell you I can do it, get your commitment, and then somehow figure out how to deliver a solution as we go." A product-based, scalable market offering requires you to not change the product every time. But to find enough "cookies" (think delicious customers) for your "cutter" that result in customer delight.

17. It's all about the money

Money is keeping score as a consequence of value creation

If you tried foundership to make a lot of money, you might also work as a consultant, a banker, or a consultant for bankers. Because most startups fail. You will at times be on the brink of bankruptcy and be unable to cash out hard currency for five to 10 years.

I also aim to become a millionaire in cash (valuations are vanity until cash hits the bank) before I turn 40. But I would do the exact same thing I do today every weekday for free. Because I am convinced this is how I can have the biggest potential impact on helping founders change our world for the better.

I hear so many people declaring, "They are doing this just until they hit Escape Velocity. When they become financially independent, they will quit and chill out." Escape Velocity refers to the amount of money one needs to quit work. Depending on standards of living, this can be a mid-seven-digit amount.

Most billionaires continue to work like crazy because they love it. Because it is their purpose in life. Because they are still hungry to build, to sell, to achieve. Not for the money, but for the love of it.

Many employed people hate their jobs. They "do it for the money". They never quit their hated job because they are earning too much, the opportunity costs and FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). However, it's not enough to become financially independent.

Which is why you should invest in yourself to build a high-value, industry- and geography-independent skillset. One that you enjoy applying every day. With or without money. Because money follows if value is there.

"Colour of money" is a real thing. New versus existing revenue matters

One of our favourite rapid-fire questions to ask guests on our B2B Startup Sales podcast is, "If you need to choose between one unit of revenue from a new customer versus from an existing customer, which one do you prefer and why?"

I am still surprised how long it takes for seasoned founders and salespeople to think

of their answer. They rarely think of the question before. If you are unclear about the above question, your sales strategy will not be crystal clear. Your incentive structure will be ambiguous. And your future team structure will not be defined (think "Hunter Sales" versus "Customer Success").

It's time to fix your Cash Conversion Cycle. Before you die

"Opportunity is vanity, revenue is sanity, and cash is reality."

Cash kills startups. Or more precisely the lack of it. But people often confuse market traction, bookings, and revenue with cash. I know many successful companies that went out of business not because they ran out of traction, but because they ran out of cash.

The most important variable I see first-time founders missing is time. Every intelligent and driven entrepreneur (and most of them are!) will figure out product-market-fit and build market traction eventually. The key question is if they can do so before running out of money.

Let's run a quick thought experiment. Your startup has 10 employees, of which everyone costs you 5k per month. So, 50k goes out of the bank every month, no matter what. You currently have 200k cash in the bank. In four months, your bank balance will hit zero and your employees will become very nervous. They see you will be unable to pay them if nothing changes.

Now the question is not if you can win a 50k deal to pay one month of salaries. The question is if you can do so within four months. It's not about winning (bookings) and then invoicing (revenue) the deal but getting the customer to pay you in full (cash).

This means every day you can speed up your market traction with the above cost structure which has a monetary value of up to 1.5k. So, if you can invest (think ROI, not costs) in anything that will result in a three to 10 times ROI in the above model, you should do it. This can be a CRM, a lead generation tool or a Sales Acceleration coach. (This is not a sales pitch to work with us. But if you felt it was one, that was it I guess).

18. Domain expertise is a must for sales hires

Domain expertise can be taught quickly. Attitude, not

Let's look at the areas for which you are hiring:

- **Functional Expertise:** "Classic" sales experience, knowledge and acumen. Good at generating and qualifying leads, following a structured sales process and closing deals.
- **Domain Expertise:** Intelligence, experience and network in your field of business such as compliance solutions for large financial service companies.
- **Technical Expertise:** Deep understanding of your technology and its ecosystem such as machine learning for unstructured regulatory and compliance documentation.

Candidates can boost the above areas with the right assets and processes in place. That is, if the candidate is able and willing to learn them. So, assessing candidates against these criteria is useful. But not enough to make a hiring decision.

A Leadership IQ study tracked 20,000 new hires over three years and saw 46% of them fail within 18 months. Only 11% were due to the three above areas. 89% of them failed due to a lack of coachability, emotional intelligence, motivation and temperament. In short, it's attitude. It is much harder to change people's attitude than to train them in hard skills. There's no difference if you hire an intern or your Chief Sales Officer.

Which is why hiring for attitude before functional, technical and domain expertise is smart.

Focus on "jobs to be done", not on what salespeople are selling you

"We are looking for a salesperson – do you know somebody?" is a question I get on a weekly basis from founders. My answer is, "Yes sure, around 1,000 salespeople as part of my job and ecosystem. But what's much more important than if I know people or not: what exactly do you want this person to achieve?"

This simple question often earns me a puzzled look along the lines of "What do you mean?"

I mean, there is a wide variety in what you expect from a salesperson:

Get people from zero to knowing you (an SDR – Sales Development Rep)...

...to having a conversation with you and discussing a collaboration (BDR – Business Development Rep)...

...to committing to a collaboration (AE – Account Executive)...

...to staying with you for a long time (CSM – Customer Success Manager).

Of course, you can hire a "jack of all trades" who is also great at building things. But think back, if the person can build and sell shit, the person might not be unstoppable at all, but rather could be building a company him/herself and not be for hire.

Therefore, you need to be clear upfront about what you need to achieve right now and not what talent you want in front of you. You might interview a Senior Account Executive that is great at closing six-figure deals, but crap at generating leads. If you have an empty sales pipeline, that person will be expensive and adding no value to your team.

Domain expertise can come with a "this is how the world works" mindset

Hiring senior salespeople with 10 to 20 years of industry experience can be a great asset. If the person is still hungry, humble and malleable enough. If not, that person might not thrive in the fast-changing, innovation-driven environment in which you are operating.

Unfortunately, I see that perfect scenario working out in less than one out of 10 cases. Because hunger, humility, adaptability, and often a combination of these traits, is lacking. We all "grow up" with a specific paradigm on "how the world works". It is hard for a person to change their Status Quo Thesis on how to do things.

Which is why it is often a smart decision to not engage such people as full-time employees. Instead, hire them as KOL – Key Opinion Leaders – as advisors. This way they can provide tremendous value to helping you build trust. And share insights on how the world currently operates from their point of view.

19. Sales structure kills my culture

Hollywood does not write movie scripts to kill creativity

"But a sales script will make me sound like a robot. Let me wing it."

Winging it in the sense of "going freestyle" is NOT something I recommend for any professional.

Leonardo DiCaprio does not learn a script word-by-word because he is a bad actor.

Rammstein practices their shows to perfection not because they are bad musicians.

Roger Federer did not enter Wimbledon with a game plan because he is a bad tennis player.

They all practice at home, rehearse with others and then follow a structured approach. This is because they are amazing professionals who want to maximise their chances at success.

Which is why you should too. So, you can go off-script when things go well, benefiting the buyer journey. You can go BACK to the script if things go south. Which they probably will at some point.

Scaling up requires repeatability. Repeatability requires structure

"But our offering / sales process / product / <other excuse> is too complex to standardise." Well, that might be true today. But it's bad news because you will never scale your business if that truth remains. Because then you need highly intelligent, experienced and thus expensive people to whom you can sell.

"Sorry my friend, I did not have time to write a shorter letter" is a quote attributed to Goethe that I love. Because it captures the essence that everybody can create complexity. Only exceptional people are able to simplify the complex. And therewith make it repeatable.

You need to reduce complexity first. Standardise second, industrialise third and only then think about automating fourth. This process forces you to make your sales structure repeatable. The company becomes people-independent so people other than you can sell.

Cluster risk kill startups and founder-dependency is a cluster risk

Every successful organisation I know has visionaries. But they all function with "normal" professionals. It is unrealistic to hire only world-class people for every role once you grow due to budget-constraints, talent availability and the basic "jobs to be done" which do not always need visionaries.

The founder(s) of a startup are also its biggest cluster risk. If the founders all share a taxi and die in an accident, the startup also dies in most cases.

You need to establish a people-independent structure before it's essential in order to reduce cluster risk. This means you can take a vacation for more than one week without worrying about what might happen.

20. Let's figure out sales once and we're done

1% better every day is 37 times better every year

Sales is like any other profession, not about "figuring it out". The click-funnel ads on Instagram about "how to make $20k passive income a month without working 12-hour days" might sound tempting. The same way the "get to 10% body fat in 60 days" adverts sound. Or the way hard drugs work. They might even "fix" your problem. But they don't give you the consistent results you need to build a company. Because they only help you to "hack" a way to "success". Without helping you to make consistent, repeatable progress.

It's much better to write down one "Learning of the Day" every day. Revisit these once a month if not once a week, implement, adapt and improve. Because sales is changing all the time as you learn and grow, finding different customers, use cases, people, market niches, and products.

You will sell different deals to different buyers in different models. Adapt

"One size fits all" does not apply in B2B sales. An advanced sales method like MEDDICC (metrics, economic buyer, decision criteria, decision process, identify plan, campion, competition) might be an overkill to sell 10k deals. But you also will not sell 25-250k deals with a click funnel in a discovery and closing call.

This is why you need to really understand to whom you are actually selling. Even more than that, you need to know how they buy offerings like yours. Your OpEx might be a SaaS subscription. Maybe they think in three-year investments, a CapEx, adding a proprietary solution. You might think in quarters, they might think in years, or months if the problem is urgent.

The challenge is that you will often sell to different stakeholders with different interests within the SAME deal. Think CEO, CFO, CIO, Head of Project Management, Head of R&D and Operations Managers. They might even have opposing interests. The Head of R&D advocates for the most visionary, expensive solution out there to be cutting-edge. But the CFO opts for the most conservative, cash-efficient one.

Becoming successful is hard. Remaining successful is harder

Sales is a lot about consistency. Sales is not about "Eureka!" moments. It is about showing up every day, following up after every call, digging deeper every time. And getting up and going again after losing a deal.

Which is why sales works a lot like playing in a professional rock band. This might seem counter intuitive as rock bands are associated with "Sex, Drugs & Rock'n'roll". The thing is though, each fan will only see you once as, let's say, Axl Rose of Guns N' Roses.

Which is why the excuse "But I played well yesterday – today is a bad day" does not work at all. Because your fan, your buyer, only meets you today. And doesn't care about your performance yesterday.

Let's take a look at rock stars and salespeople. There are many "shooting stars" that came, shone, but vanished. There are very few that are successful over the years or even decades. Staying consistent and successful is hard, but crucial. Get yourself an accountability group if it is helpful. But stay consistent at all times.

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https://www.thesalesplaybook.com/bookacall

5-20 Million & Beyond: Scale Sales Predictably

Congratulations on hitting 1 million euros annual revenue or in terms of a "1 million run rate" 83,500 euros MRR (Monthly Recurring Revenue). Enjoy this moment...

...and prepare to "Cross the Chasm".

There is a saying which goes, "What got you here will not get you there", which I think is incredibly relevant.

I have seen multiple founders reaching a 1 million annual revenue without hiring any salespeople, by selling two to 10 six-figure deals themselves. This is a tremendous achievement and something you can be proud of if you did it yourself.

There are however a few warning signs on the wall regarding what could happen next because you would not have validated these important mechanisms on your journey so far:

- Founder Bonus: How much harder is it to sell your offering for somebody else? What is the impact on sales cycle times, conversion rates, sales rep ramp-up times? Can somebody other than you, the founder and CEO, sell your offering?
- Scalable Process: Where does the process break? If you fix one mechanism, will this truly fix the problem?
- Viable Market: Are there really 50 viable customers in the niche in which you sold five deals?

21. Hiring more salespeople will fix traction

Hire out of opportunity, not neediness. If it's not "hell yeah", then it is a no

People do stupid things if they need something "at all costs". They offer unnecessary discounts to "bully clients", therefore losing status before even starting the collaboration. But hiring a person is way more important than winning a customer. Chance is that pressure from investors and also colleagues if overloaded will be to "get it done, now".

Hiring should happen out of a position of strength, of offering opportunities and solving problems for other people. Doing business with a client who does not fit your ICP (Ideal Customer Profile) will at best be profitable with no negative consequences. At worst, the relationship will be painful and unprofitable.

But hiring a colleague who is not a great fit for your business and work culture can do much more harm than good. This can include scaring away customers, existing employees, and even future top talent.

Which is why following the principles of "Topgrading" makes a lot of sense. Every hire should heighten the quality standards rather than lower them, even if this slows down the hiring process. Because hiring, ramping, coaching and then, after three months, parting ways with the person is much more problematic. Then you go back to Square 1, having lost at least three to 12 months, 30,000 to 300,000 euros in cash, opportunity costs, and harmed your culture.

"Hire slow, fire fast," people say. But don't fire fast if you're the problem

I worked with a scale-up that went from nothing to 5 million euros in annual revenues in four years, with no external investors. The company is successful, has built founder-led sales and hired a great VP Sales. They also hired seven sales reps within two years, and parted ways from six of them. They acknowledge they were part of this "hiring and firing chapter".

They have now hired two new salespeople, who together with the VP Sales, are committed to learn, share and improve every day. The company now invests more into creating the right environment, expectations, coaching and processes, to make people successful even if they are not sales rockstars from Day 1.

Always hire two sales reps for the same role at the same time, so you can differentiate whether people or the company is the problem. If this sounds expensive to you, these two people will work as a "tag team" which is friendly competitive, increasing the odds for both to succeed. If one of them doesn't ramp well and the other does in the same environment, the decision is yours if you focus on the top performer. If both do not perform, you need to go back to your drawing board and fix the company or your hiring and coaching process, but not the sales talent.

If attitude, intelligence and coachability are there, keep talent. If not, then don't

I have monthly deep-dive 1:1 sessions with employees based on our six company values. The meetings are not about operational sales performance. This is because performance can vary and is generally "fixable" as long as attitude, intelligence and coachability are there.

If not, you can try to "fix people" which works about as well as it does in every human relationship – it doesn't work. People struggle to change their fundamental characters without significant trigger events such as a severe accident, a broken relationship or a fundamental economic need. Your act of hiring or firing is typically not one such trigger event.

I always stay loyal to people who give it their all. Who take feedback and adapt. Who have the intelligence and drive to "make things happen" with scarce resources. Results may vary short-term due to bad luck or market situations. For example, less sales in July/August than September/October due to summer vacations. But results will always be bad mid- to long-term if the attitude is bad. If coachability and intelligence are not there, let people move on.

22. Salespeople will fully ramp within three months if not three weeks

Get your s together BEFORE people hit the ground***

"We are hiring a senior salesperson. Then building sales assets. That salesperson will figure out product-market-fit for us. Oh, and bring in EUR 500 to 1,000k revenue in their first year. I mean, that person asked for a 150 to 300k salary, right?"

Nobody gets a world-class musician on stage before the stage is there. Otherwise,

it would be a complete waste of time, resources and talent and result in an angry, disappointed and unproductive musician. Also, nobody expects the musician to build the stage. Playing a concert and building a stage are different "jobs to be done".

The challenge is now that you might not have "built the stage" yet because you are too busy "playing music" until your sales rockstar hits the ground.

Most salespeople will not appreciate your demand for them to "build the stage" for you. They identify with generating leads, pipeline, revenue and commissions for themselves. They will get frustrated if they don't believe they will be successful with you. They are likely to quit if they think they can work easier, faster, and better at another place.

Which is why you want to create an environment where salespeople can thrive. Then they are worth their high salaries and will stay with you for a long time.

If your sales cycle is six months, how can one fully ramp in three months?

I am convinced that time is the most underrated factor in B2B sales, besides listening.

You need insights on how your customer demographics, ticket sizes, sales cycle times and ramping times interact. So, here are a few "ballpark figures":

- **SMB Sales:** 5-500 FTEs, 1-20k deals, two to 12-week sales cycles, one to three stakeholders
- **B2B Sales:** 500-10k FTEs, 20-100k deals, three to nine-month sales cycles, three to seven stakeholders
- **Enterprise Sales:** 10k+ FTEs, 100-1,000k deals, six to 24-month sales cycles, five to 20 stakeholders

These are rough guiding posts, but my point is this: you cannot expect to hire a sales rep to hit the ground and close a six-figure deal from zero to net revenue in less than three months.

Which is why you would do well to develop more granular OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) to measure progress such as generated SQLs (Sales Qualified Leads). Or discovery calls converted to opportunities. Or closed deals out of an existing sales pipeline.

Great sales reps have questions for you. Bad sales reps make excuses

Elite athletes will not always be humble in victory. But they are very humble in defeat. Even a loud-mouthed Conor McGregor goes back to the drawing board minutes after losing a fight. He will watch the fight again, five to 10 more times. He asks his coach how to do better next time. And then comes back stronger.

"Sometimes you win, sometimes you learn." A good conversion rate from opportunity to Closed/Won is anywhere between 20-40%. This depends on how rigidly you qualify, and on the quality of your sales process and people. So, as a result, salespeople learn in 60-80% of their cases.

That is, if they do. The bad ones will always have standard "smokescreen" excuses such as, "The prospect did not have budget / authority / need / timing." For these cases, you can send a BANT-based discovery quiz. But that is not what salespeople

are for. Salespeople are there to help people get clarity, build trust, and overcome concerns. They then take action, because customers will not do so by themselves.

Great sales reps will "push your FAQ" early and often because they want to do better next time. They want to understand what they could have done and how to improve. They will start the conversation with "How could I have behaved / answered / acted differently?" rather than "The prospect could / would / should have behaved differently".

23. The CEO should stop selling now

The CEO must always sell. Customers, talent, investors

"Sales = making money from customers."

This is a perception many people have when it comes to sales. But sales is, at the core, helping other people to make an informed decision about taking action. About making it easy to learn, understand and buy an offer. This can be a product, a service, technology or even a business model.

But it can also be as much about recruiting top talent. Or helping an investor to scale faster. The CEO is very often the decision maker to hire a talented person or pursue venture capital. The CEO is almost always still involved in closing "lighthouse" customer relationships.

Which is why the CEO should never, ever stop selling and improving his or her sales skills. Because it is one of the highest-leverage skills, not just to win customers, but to also keep key employees, investors, partners and suppliers

CEO = "Close Every Opportunity"

The CEO is a closing asset. With no ego involved, the CEO still has the highest authority in an organisation to make or kill a deal. This can include "going the extra mile" when investing in a key client with value (or a discount "off the standard playbook"). This does not mean the CEO needs to lead or even take part throughout the sales process. They just need to be available to the sales team to help close the deal wherever tactically useful.

Therefore, the CEO should join the sales team to serve (not brag) as a closing asset. The CEO is at their disposal as a trusted authority. Or, alternatively, as "the bad guy". Think "I will not allow my sales rep to give you a discount no other customer gets." Or as "the good guy". Think "I love what you're doing, winning your business is a top priority for me and I will personally oversee its implementation."

Ego Is The Enemy. Your job now is to make other people into rockstars

"I am still the best sales rep in my company" is a quote I hear more often than I like from VP Sales or the CEO. This is a great ego-booster. But it also shows that you did not yet manage to transition from a people-centric to a process-driven sales organisation. Your job as a CEO or VP Sales is not to shine the brightest yourself. It is to enable others. And make them successful so you can leverage your capabilities more. This is a culture question, and it helps your authority if you did perform well

in those roles you are now leading. But now, it is about helping others do the same, at scale.

Your job now is increasingly about making people other than yourself the rockstars. Because you have only 40-60 hours a week. A sales team of 10 people has 400-600 hours of sales time available. Multiply your sales impact by enabling your team.

24. Hiring great sales talent is reasonably easy

The war for B2B sales talent is over. Talent has won

This sounds funny if you are a sales talent. It isn't if you are hiring as an entrepreneur because, after all, you are not Salesforce, Microsoft or UiPath which are able to pay 150 to 300k euros or more for an Account Executive. You are also unable to provide the environment for a sales rep to sell 1 to 1.5 million euros in annual (recurring) revenue per year. But large tech companies are thriving and hungry as hell for talent.

Which is why you need to change your mindset if you haven't done so already. Stop thinking "top talent has the amazing opportunity to join us." Start thinking "winning top talent is like winning a great customer." Work hard to sharpen your value proposition and build a pipeline. Build a rigorous process and a confident, but service-orientated, attitude to move towards the close.

Top B2B sales talent will NOT work for you if you do not offer them a relevant advantage. And believe me, "If you are a rockstar, you will earn 100,000 euros and in two years even own 0.5% of equity" is not that. That is a base salary at an enterprise software firm and top talent can go to work for them right now. And make two or three times that if they're great.

Talent acquisition is "just" another funnel. Sell the job well

"What we expect from you... what you bring to the table" are the first two paragraphs with six to nine bullet points in most job ads I see. You would never frame a sales presentation to a customer like that (I hope?). Top sales talent first wants to know what you can offer. Only then would they even consider looking at what you expect from them.

Start with "What we offer you". Sell the position with an appealing message that gets people excited about the job. Only once you achieve excitement or at least intrigue will what you expect from them matter.

I could go on for three pages that using your CRM for talent sourcing and recruiting is a good choice (it is not...). Use an ATS – an Applicant Tracking System – to structure your sales talent sourcing, prospecting, selling and closing process. But that is a topic for another book, I guess. Or read "Hire for Attitude", "Topgrading" and "Hire Right for Higher Profits".

Plan two to three months to attract, onboard and ramp sales talent

"We plan to have a new sales rep selling for us in September."

When I hear this kind of phrase, it is typically somewhere between May and July of

that year. If the sales talent signs an employment agreement and can start on 1st August, this might even work. But more often than not, the CEO / VP Sales "will start in the next one to two weeks" of the hiring process, and then find out that – like in B2B sales – things move slower than expected.

Which is why I recommend you plan six to nine months from the decision to hire until you can expect a ramped salesperson hitting their quota. Let me give you an example:

- **January:** Decision to hire an Account Executive
- **Feb-March:** Job ad publishing, talent sourcing, first interviews
- **April:** Several job interviews, remote tasks, onsite interviews for two to four candidates. Employment agreement signed
- **May-June:** Person is still employed by current employer and 100% absorbed
- **July:** Person starts at your company, onboarding, training, first "field days"

In this case, it took you six to seven months from decision to hire. More often than desirable, a sales talent will sign with you, but not show up to the job because of another opportunity. Or not work out as a hire. Or the talent sourcing takes longer.

25. ABC – Always Be Coaching (by Alen Cerovina)

You don't hire a superstar and expect him to train himself

You grew your revenue successfully. Now it's time to grow even bigger. You have a product-market-fit. You designed a repeatable sales process. You have all the tech tools and data. Now you start to hire. You want experts – sales talents with experience. They will reduce your effort and increase revenue at the same time. They know how to sell, right? And there the problems start.

This myth is common in growing organizations. In a lot of cases, that's the reason why growth is slowing down or even stopping. It's like hiring an expensive player for your football team and expecting him to train himself.

ABC² - "Always be coaching" to "always be closing"

Therefore, it is worth the investment to move to "ABC² -> "Always be coaching" if you want to "always be closing".

Instead of reducing your effort, you must spend more time training. Easy rule of thumb: the bigger the team, the more time you must plan for training. Or even better, set up an environment where continuous training is part of the weekly routine.

Important note: theory and practical training are two different things. It's important to understand the theory, but it is even more important to be able to use it. This is another common mistake in fast growing organisations. I have a playbook. Read it. That's it, done. To give you an easy example, I know I must run fast, dribble and jump to do a dunk. Easy. That's the theory. But the reality is far from being easy. I have to try, make mistakes, repeat, get better, make mistakes again, and at some point, I'll be able to do it.

Schedule one-to-one and group trainings, pitching sessions, shadowing, role plays and discussing feedback. Use data to spot weaknesses in your team but especially personal areas of improvement. Act as a personal coach. Or put a "good closer" with an "untrained closer". Make sure the team is exchanging ideas for problems and best practices. That will reduce your effort. At least for a while.

Define fix times and put them in the calendar. Of course, not during the best sales times. Make sure all the team is participating, it is mandatory. Don't accept excuses from anyone. Not from your best sales talent or from your newbie. Show up prepared. That will demonstrate the importance of the training.

Internal vs External: Same words, different behaviours

From time to time get external input. Someone who can give you external perspective and motivation. It's funny that the same words from a manager and an external coach lead to different behaviours.

The goal of this it is to define a minimum quality standard. From this point on you can improve, raise the bar, and define a new – higher – standard. When you finish, start again. This will lead to better efficiency, faster onboarding, higher revenue, and less churn. And that's an outcome every manager can ask for.

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Part B: 84 Micro-Scripts to go from Zero to 20 Million Euros ARR quickly

0 Master the fundamentals

#1 Quid pro quo

Sales is NOT about asking people for money or about prospects requesting pitches, demos and offers.

At least it shouldn't be. Sales is about a trade of value between you and your prospect.

So, if you're asked to give something, make sure you receive something of value in return.

What you can do

- **Think poker:** You only show all your cards if the other person calls right?
- **Establish value:** Offer a three to 10 times ROI investment opportunity with value drivers.
- **Money's not everything:** A lower price can be OK if you get a testimonial, referral etc.

#2 Ego is the enemy

Some say there are lions and elephants in sales. Lions have big mouths to convince customers they are awesome. Elephants have big ears to listen actively.

"We are a startup, our technology, we can, we want, we do, our plans, …"
– stop it. Sales is NEVER about you, always about the customer.

What you can do

- **Replace first with third person:** We do -> Customers achieve.
- **Let your customers speak:** People buy from people. Preferably not salespeople.
- **Take the solution off the table:** Imagine you don't have a solution to sell at all.

#3 Date In, Date Out

"Let me discuss this internally and get back to you if we're interested," many prospects say.

They rarely reply. They forget, it isn't a priority, or they don't know what to do next. Or they do not want to tell you they made no progress with their decision. Or they simply don't care.

What you can do

- **Schedule a follow-up:** Fix date, time, and format (video call / meeting).
- **Fix the agenda:** Get commitment for the target outcome of the next meeting.
- **Secure the audience:** Ask who else should be in the meeting for the target outcome.

#4 Value before price

Nobody wants to spend money or be sold. But people love to buy if they see a great deal.

Sales rookies talk costs, intermediates sell price, professionals discuss value, and experts offer an investment.

Because, for a prospect, any price without value means that "the offer is too expensive".

What you can do

- **Wording matters:** "Ctrl+F" in all your documents to replace costs / price with investment.
- **Ask openly:** Ask prospects how much offering X is worth for them.
- **Make it inevitable:** Establish a calculated ROI at least three times the price before talking money.

#5 Use useful use cases

Nobody buys technology, features, modules, seats, users. Nobody.

People want you to make their real-world problems go away.

They think in use cases, the more specific the better.

What you can do

- **Before/After:** Showcase "how other customers go from darkness to light".
- **Tell to win:** Increase empathy by telling your story with real customers.
- **Why unsolved:** Explain why a customer did not solve the problem without you.

#6 Reward returns, reverse risks

Jordan Belfort from "The Wolf of Wall Street" got many things wrong, but one of his insights is useful:

You need to increase people's pain threshold and reduce people's action threshold.

If people don't feel more pain than their hesitation to act, nothing will happen.

What you can do

- **Paint the pain:** Assess how much money one loses with simple calculations.
- **Reward returns:** Paint a proven picture of how other people became successful.
- **Offer risk reversal**: Establish an action-based money-back guarantee.

#7 Why before what before how

If I don't see a problem, I don't need a solution.

If I don't understand the solution itself, I don't care how it works.

Make sure your prospect (not you!) acknowledges a problem and believes in the solution.

What you can do

- **Prioritise discovery:** Invest up to 50% of your initial call to understanding the problem.
- **Ask "why" five times:** Dig deeper to get to the root cause of why a problem still exists.
- **Create urgency:** Ask for commitment to fix the problem now but not before you understand the problem.

#8 Understand before being understood

Listening by keeping your mouth shut is easy. To listen actively is a different beast.

It is much harder as it means silencing your inner voices, instead of thinking about what to say next.

It means to be 100% present instead of waiting for your "speaking slot".

You will only learn about your customer's true problems if you are open.

What you can do

- **Think Walkie-Talkie:** If you're speaking (on the button), you don't listen.
- **Ask open questions:** Strive to understand, not to "hunt for the yes".
- **Breathe and count:** Count 21, 22, 23 before you speak after your prospect.

#9 Script successful selling propositions

"Sales is an art; it is just really difficult to find great people that are winging it well." Bullshit!

Sales is NOT an art. It's a sport. Sure, talent helps, but execution is everything.

Especially if you cannot (yet) afford 150-300k OTE sales reps, you need to help your people out.

What you can do

- **Write mini scripts:** Write the 30 second intro. Write the two-minute demo. Then keep going.
- **Record your calls:** Use a software solution like Unique to replay what you actually do on a call.
- **Blend the best:** Each rep has micro scripts that work for them. Scale that.

#10 Make it simple to understand and evaluate

"KVA – Kinder Vorstand Altersheim," ("primary-school reading level") is what a Managing Director in consulting once told me.

I was confused as he had asked me to simplify a board-level proposal to Grade 6 complexity.

CXOs are smart, but also incredibly busy with a heavy mental load. They appreciate simplicity.

What you can do

- **Record a video:** If you cannot sell it in under five minutes, it is too complex.
- **Manage complexity:** Complexity needs to be simplified, otherwise people don't buy it.
- **Use action titles:** Start with one-liners (three to nine words). Only then "paint the slides".

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1 Setup your success

#11 Begin with best of the breed

Hundreds of thousands of people have been selling before you. Those solutions which are here today still work.

If you need a CRM, why not go with HubSpot, Salesforce or Pipedrive?

If you need productivity, try G Suite, or Microsoft and Slack.

What you can do

- **Make or buy:** Make for your core competency. Buy for the rest. Period.
- **Keep things simple:** You don't need Salesforce Unlimited as a startup. Really.
- **Validate before scale:** Don't think "how does this scale times 100?" before you know if it needs to.

#12 Validation before automation

"You can do a lot of mistakes by hand, but if you want to fuck up big time, you need IT."

A typo in one email is one typo. A typo in a cold email campaign to 100 people is 100 typos.

A repeated opening rate of roughly 30% on cold email campaigns pushes you into the spam folder. Yes, you.

What you can do

- **Start small:** Have conversations that don't scale. Then think how to scale.
- **Do the right things:** Effectiveness is more important than efficiency in a startup.
- **Be unbiased:** Quantify success before you start a validation.

#13 Set sales call agendas actively

Meeting title: "Startup x Prospect". Agenda: 0. Plan: "Let's see how it goes".

It's called MAS – Mindless Accepting Syndrome. People committing time without clear intent.

But how can you expect a prospect to be well-prepared without clear expectations? You can't.

What you can do

- **Get the basics right:** Goals, status quo, challenges -> what you can do -> next steps.
- **Ensure consistency:** Set the agenda. Send the invite yourself. Every. Single. Time.
- **One call, one intention:** Be crystal clear what you want to get out of a scheduled call.

#14 Stop spending, start investing

"How much are you willing to spend?" is the wrong question as I see it.

I am always willing to spend exactly zero. But I am willing to invest into validating a hypothesis.

Resources are not only your money, but also your time, focus, energy and more.

What you can do

- **Investment request:** Build a simple email template you will always use for investments.
- **Less mistakes over time:** Maximise for accelerated learning instead of not making any mistakes.
- **Hedge your bets:** Start small to validate, scale if validated, stop if de-validated.

#15 Trade time for training and trainers

"But I don't have time for training and little money for trainers." Sure, both are limited.

But so is your runway, your current effectiveness and your learning curve.

Startups are not big versus small, but fast versus slow. The player learning the most at the fastest pace wins.

What you can do

- **Assess status quo:** On what did you spend (too) much of your weekly time today?
- **Understand leverage:** 5% better at any activity on which you spend up to five hours a week is big leverage.
- **Learn from athletes:** All athletes train regularly. Because that's what it takes.

#16 Qualify before you let people buy

You don't do prospects a favour if you find out after three calls that you cannot help them.

Discovery is understanding if you can help, qualification is understanding if they want help.

Sales reps often slack on qualification because "it could kill the deal". But, if it comes to it, they should.

What you can do

- **Base for discussion:** Get feedback on five to 15 multiple-choice questions before a call.
- **Be a good steward:** If you are not an (ideal) fit for a prospect, tell them so.
- **Avoid "AUA":** "Anhauen - Umhauen - Abhauen" does not work for SaaS...

#17 Track sales time to tackle trouble

"But I don't have time for that" / "I don't have enough leads" / "People never have money".

Salespeople are geniuses at inventing any excuse as to why they are not successful.

Work to understand why they are not spending more time selling and how to change it.

What you can do

- **Track reality:** Track five to seven metrics daily for a month to understand the reality.
- **Track conversions:** Track outreach -> interaction -> opportunity -> customer ratios.
- **Track cohorts:** Track differences between similar sales reps over time.

#18 Predictability by people following process

"But I will only hire A+ players that are world-class with zero process at my startup."

Nope, you won't. Let's be honest for a second: you can't afford them (yet). You lack the money, reputation, environment, leverage and probably network to do so.

What you can do

- **Have clear intent:** Be clear if you want to even hire people, if not that's also OK.
- **Avoid "the bus risk":** If you are hit by a bus, does the business prosper without you?
- **Company > people:** People work for the company, not the other way around.

#19 Niches are nice, as everybody is nobody

If something works, people move onto the next thing. If it does not, people move on as well.

We are conditioned to "finish a course" and then "prepare for the next".

But in sales, you always want to take the same exam with as few variations as possible.

What you can do

- **Find lookalikes:** Ask yourself how you can win more identical customers.
- **Build authority:** Become the go-to company for a very specific micro-niche.
- **Say no a lot:** You don't want that big logo if it is asking for on-premises etc.

#20 Experiment SMARTLY to avoid dumb mistakes

Prospect: "We're doing pretty well at cold email, but LinkedIn does not work for us."

Me: "What's your reply and booking rates from both channels for campaigns to 50 people?"

Prospect: "How should I know? I just think we should do more cold emails. And ads."

What you can do

- **Be SMART:** Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant, Time-Bound.
- **Be honest:** Make assumptions, validate them, take the consequences.
- **Embrace discomfort:** You're in the business of being successful, not comfortable.

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2 Validate your market

#21 Founder does it first

"I just hired a senior sales rep to figure out product-market-fit as I've never done this before."

Salespeople are NOT magicians. They are trained to sell, not to validate initiatives for you.

This is why you want to validate all other variables other than the sales rep first.

What you can do

- **Deconstruct:** Cross out the involved variables (channel, price, time).
- **Document:** Capture what works and what does not.
- **Delegate:** Hand the initiative to a sales rep and validate if it still works.

#22 FOMO is not your friend

Sales forecasting is notoriously difficult because any sales rep (including those I know) is too optimistic.

None of us "kill" deals that are never going to buy vigorously, early, or candidly enough.

But FOMO - the Fear Of Missing Out - is a real thing and takes conscious effort to avoid.

What you can do

- **In doubt disqualify:** Ask prospects to "kill the deal" without a clear way forward.
- **Deconstruct (again):** Understand if you can't close for just today, but can you commit today?
- **Forcing function:** Force a prospect to commit or catch up in three to six months.

#23 Answer "What's in for me?"

"What's in for me?" That's the only real question your prospect has for you.

No PowerPoint, no features, no technology, no benefits, no stats, no demos.

Either you help people improve their lives or they won't care about you.

What you can do

- **Personal success:** Sales reps should ask themselves, "What do I need to get promoted within six to 12 months?"
- **Reduce to the max:** A Head of Finance doesn't need your CEO and CIO pitch.
- **Capture concerns:** List everything a buyer needs. Then validate if you can deliver.

#24 Be specific but not stubborn

The more specific your go-to market strategy, tactics and initiatives, the better.

Conquering a micro-niche and scaling this success by 10 then by 100 is the goal.

Be willing to adapt your approach if data tells you that it does not work. Ego is the enemy.

What you can do

- **Definition of done:** Quantify what a successful market validation means to you.
- **Most Wanted List:** Line out a TOP 10/50 target account list of your ICP.
- **Avoid insanity:** Don't repeat the same initiative expecting different results.

#25 B2B is H2H – Humans to Humans

"We sell to CIOs, CTOs and CDOs of large banks." No, you do not.

You sell to individuals, as in human beings. By having human conversations.

You don't sell five- and six-figure deals over a click-funnel. That's what sales reps are for.

What you can do

- **Build Personas:** Go from "CXO" (the role) to "Max Müller" (the real person).
- **Customer Advisors:** Ask your customers openly to help you build empathy.
- **Genuine intent:** Sales is helping people to improve their lives, not with money.

#26 Predictable pipeline for president

Closed revenue, number of new customers and conversions are lagging indicators.

But you want to "predict the future" by understanding today what you will close tomorrow. This means you need to validate and iterate your assumptions on pipeline conversions.

What you can do

- **Lead Velocity Rate:** Speed matters, so invest early to understand your sales cycle.
- **Avoid PoCs:** If you must, carry out Proof of Values aiming for 70-90% conversion.
- **Do a post-mortem:** Ask "If we don't end up working together, what went wrong?"

#27 Sales is stupid – if your niche works

Sales is NOT about intellectual peak power. At least it shouldn't be. That's because you want to build a repeatable, people-independent sales engine.

It's not an ensemble of hard-to-manage "rockstars" that sometimes perform, and often not.

What you can do

- **Focus on what works:** If it works, "crank the hell out of it" (until it stops working).
- **Embrace simplicity:** Less is more, easier to understand, think about and train for.
- **Reduce CAC:** Your Customer Acquisition Costs decrease without trial and error.

#28 Avoid HiPPOs - Highest Paid Person's Opinions

As a founder and CEO or Sales Leader, you are at the risk of overruling your team. Junior sales reps and customers might not dare to disagree with you.

Which is why you need to put processes and a culture in place to avoid HiPPOs.

What you can do

- **Decide with data:** Where unavailable, make assumptions and validate them.
- **Hold back:** Let your team talk first, only offer coaching / advice to decide.
- **Pick your battles:** Yes, "the HiPPO" needs to make some hard decisions alone.

#29 Craft buyer journeys instead of sales processes

Everybody likes to buy. Nobody likes to be sold.

Information is power. A buyers' power is increasing with the maturity of the internet.

Which is why the world is becoming ever-more buyer-centric, and sales needs to adapt.

What you can do

- **Be transparent:** If your buyer journey has five specific steps, tell prospects openly.
- **Be candid:** Assure prospects that you will not waste their – and your own – time.
- **Be open:** "Always Be Closing" is from the 1980s, offer prospects "a way out".

#30 Sometimes you win, sometimes you learn, but never lose

A healthy B2B SaaS opportunity -> closed/won conversion rates is anywhere between 25-50%.

Which means you "lose" a lot of deals. But they're only lost if you don't learn from them.

Embrace a "Never lose, only win or learn" mindset to get 1% better every day.

What you can do

- **Get feedback:** Ask for a referral, industry insights, what to change to win.
- **Reduce mental load:** Focus on the prospects who are eager to invest with you.
- **Rebound later:** Snooze the opportunity for three to six months, then re-connect.

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3 Generate leads

#31 Write like you speak

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What you can do

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- **Pick your battles:** Yes, "the HiPPO" needs to make some hard decisions alone.

#32 Not all leads are equal

A lead is not a lead is not a lead. Lead sources are a great way to start.

A customer referral is worth more than a whitepaper download.

This does not mean that you can skip steps of the customer journey.

What you can do

- **Qualify leads quickly:** A two-minute qualification quiz can save you a 30-minute video call.
- **Prioritise high-intent:** Act swiftly if a prospect is ready-to-buy today.
- **Act professionally:** Don't slack just because a prospect is your excited friend.

#33 Trust trumps templates

Standardisation scales sales. Templates, snippets and processes matter for sure.

But for five- and six-figure deals, people still buy from people because they trust you.

Make sure you have high credibility by working on intent, integrity, capabilities and results.

What you can do

- **Embrace 80/20:** Standardise 80% but make the 20% of personalisation count.
- **Ensure integrity:** Do what you say and say what you do. Always. Nothing less.
- **Get skin in the game:** If you're not willing to take a risk, why should your customer?

#34 One conversion at a time

"Hey, it's amazing what you do, why don't we talk, here's a demo and here's a discount code!"

"Who are you, where are you from and what do you want?" are my first (implicit) questions.

If you're in a hurry, take it slow: get people to talk first, listen, evaluate, then buy.

What you can do

- **Start from the top:** Generating more qualified leads solves most of the problems.
- **Reduce friction:** Important if you have more capacity than leads.
- **Analyse the weakest link:** If you have zero leads, your closing is of no use. And vice versa.

#35 Pick up the damn phone

Seriously, I don't care in which nurturing sequence you want to put your hot lead.

The whole point of sales is to have a human conversation to help people solve problems.

So "if you have a phone number and don't call, it's a crime" (Patrick Trümpi).

What you can do

- **Do power hours:** We're all busy, so we find excuses not to call. Make time for it.
- **Optimise for success:** Your goal is to be successful, not to stay in your comfort zone.
- **Create intrigue:** If you don't have a phone number, create a reason to receive it.

#36 OCTA: One Call To Action

The Choice Paradox is a real thing, so make it easy for people to act.

"Learn more", "Sign up for free", "Book a call", "Contact us", "Get the whitepaper".

I get it, I get it: you have so many things to offer. But everyone also has very limited mental capacity.

What you can do

- **Keep it simple:** "Book a call" if sales-led, "Start free trial" if product-led.
- **Ensure robustness:** Use 301-Links (.../bookacall) instead of direct links for CTAs.
- **Focus on one thing:** Does it convert, yes or no? Everything else is a vanity metric.

#37 Speak like your customers

Your customers are not your investors.

They don't care about your TAM, CAC, CLV, ARR and whatnot.

They speak "their language" every day, not yours.

What you can do

- **Mirror language:** Use the exact words, phrases etc. your customers use.
- **Status alignment:** Showcase industry-specific lingo to show you're "one of them".
- **Remove innovation:** Innovation attracts prospects but prevents them from buying.

#38 Write for one person at scale

"I felt attacked by your ICP," is one of the biggest compliments I ever got for my writing.

This founder and CEO identified 100% with my Ideal Customer Profile copywriting. It was as if it were specifically written for that one person. The challenge here is to do it at scale.

What you can do

- **Focus on emotions:** Write for the human being, not the role, not the company.
- **Use actual dialogue:** Transcribe goals, challenges and emotions of actual people.
- **Niche down:** Focus on a niche where you can write one letter for 1,000 people.

#39 Validate first, automate second

"Which tool is best for email / LinkedIn / content marketing automation?"

The one that helps you to personalize your prospecting at scale, in the most human way possible. Because people buy from people.

What you can do

- **Go manual first:** Do what you want to automate 50 to 100 times first to validate it.
- **Start slow and small:** Start with 20-50 people campaigns to limit your potential fuck-up risks.
- **Start with test areas:** If your core market is DACH, why not conduct a test tech in Finland?

#40 Play where your customers play

LinkedIn is an amazing place to find customers. For most businesses.

But if your customers are on XING, TikTok, the metaverse or whatever...

...that's where you need to play then. Embrace your customer's world, not your comfort.

What you can do

- **Focus your plays:** Master two to three sales channels instead of "spray and pray" on five or more.
- **Build a swipe file:** Collect "mini case studies" of what works on which channels.
- **Analyse competitors:** Where, how and why are your successful competitors selling?

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4 Close more deals faster

#41 Trust trumps technology

"But we customised this beautifully designed 34-page sales presentation just for them!"

Prospects don't fancy running lengthy PoCs, hour-long meetings and RfPs (requests for proposals) with you.

But they will if they feel that's the only way to build the required trust to buy with vendors.

What you can do

- **Candid comms:** Be radically frank on what seems to be missing for a collaboration.
- **Informal comms:** A five-minute WhatsApp call often clarifies more than 50 PowerPoint slides.
- **Use social proof:** A reference call or even solid case studies can replace a PoC.

#42 Ask for a no before you go

Stop "hunting for yes". People rarely justify why they say "Yes".

But if they say "No", they justify themselves automatically. We are conditioned to do so.

So, a "No" provides you with a great opportunity to increase the flow of information.

What you can do

- **Poke the bear:** "If there are no questions, we can start immediately, right?..."
- **Ask for the money:** "There seems to be a solid case to invest 100k right now..."
- **Pain the future state:** "(How) do you scale 10 times with up to three times operational costs?"

#43 The money is in the follow-up

Closing is only a fraction of your time but 100% of your revenue.

Do an excellent job at prospecting, discovery and buyer journey, but fail to close and you finish with nothing.

Carry out an amazing follow-up, close a deal, repeat this five to 10 times per month, and you close with up to 1 million a year.

What you can do

- **Video Sales Letters:** A picture says more than 1,000 words. A video says even more.
- **Stay consistent:** Always take time to discuss, commit and schedule next steps.
- Don't slack: "The deal is basically done" doesn't close 80% of opportunities.

#44 Coach your champion to close

"Don't worry, I've got this and know how I will present it to the board," says the prospect.

The reality is: that's not realistic if lacking background knowledge, assets and answers.

Think back to how great (or bad?) you were at selling your offering for the first time in your life.

What you can do

- **Video Walkthrough:** Record a video, ideally together with your champion.
- **Get a table seat:** The closer to "the action" you are, the better you understand it.
- **Ask for a 1:1:** Ask for a 15-minute 1:1 with stakeholders to resolve concerns.

#45 Mutual Action Plans Make Money

The "throwing sales collateral over the fence" times are over. Nobody likes unsolicited offers.

Buyers want to feel in control of their fate and understand what lies ahead of them.

They are willing to help you sell your offering internally – if only you let them.

What you can do

- **Make it truly mutual:** Gain prospect engagement, make sure buyers are contributing.
- **Work backwards:** Create urgency by working from go-live to milestones.
- **Start early:** Get all key stakeholders on board early on.

#46 Start with SMBs, elevate to enterprise

"The enterprise market is huge, there are six-figure deals instead of five-figure deals, and so much more..."

Sure thing, that's why the whole B2B SaaS world is "flocking there", creating a red ocean.

This means there is endless competition, high complexity, long sales cycles and cluster risks.

What you can do

- **High velocity:** SMB deals often close two to four times faster than enterprise deals.
- **High volume:** 50 SMBs give you more data points than five to 10 enterprises.
- **High risk tolerance:** Enterprises rarely want to be first to commit to a new solution.

#47 MEDDICC is not a doctor – but healthy

"MEDDICC" stands for Metrics, Economic Buyer, Decision Criteria, Decision Process, Identify Pain, Champion and Competition. Sounds complicated, but so is closing six-figure deals.

It does not need to be MEDDICC, but any sales methodology is better than no methodology.

What you can do

- **Start simple:** BANT (Budget, Authority, Need, Timing) is from the 1980s, but it works.
- **Keep it simple:** Check three to five boxes consistently instead of 10 or more CRM fields rarely.
- **Adjust for ACV:** Your Annual Contract Value determines your sales complexity.

#48 Stop selling costs, start letting people invest

You are not desperate to close a deal. You are here to make an offer. You are the prize.

People love to be part of a success story and investing early in a product or idea that becomes huge.

This is a great selling point as a B2B SaaS startup if you play it right and built trust.

What you can do

- **Create urgency:** Clarify that your current market offering is not here to stay.
- **Create exclusivity:** Your capacity to serve customers is limited. Fact. But use it.
- **Create a community:** Some buyers want to be an active part of "the next big thing".

#49 Closing is caused by consistent communication

"I was 100% sure the offer would close. But now I've been ghosted for weeks."

An open, increasing flow of information is a key leading indicator towards closing a deal.

If your prospect stops communicating with you, that's a dark-orange flag.

What you can do

- **Gain accountability:** Get the prospect to invest their time and reputation in the deal.
- **Gain micro-wins:** New information and a potential new stakeholder helps you understand better.
- **Gain predictability:** Talk, then write, then talk. Don't ever just write towards closing.

#50 Thank people for investing in them and trusting in you

People want to do the right thing. They want to make their company and team successful.

Any investment is not for you, but for them. Which is true, but it benefits from emphasis.

It makes buyers feel so much better that you are just helping them to do what's right.

What you can do

- **Appreciate empathy:** Clarify you would make the same decision if you were them.
- **Appreciate comms:** How you say thank you on closing a deal matters a great deal.
- **Appreciate trust:** Trust can take years to build, but seconds to destroy.

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5 Build a great sales team

#51 Train to retain

Ambitious, high-performing sales reps often leave a startup after 18 to 24 months.

This is because they feel they are not advancing quickly enough, especially if there are long sales cycles.

So, for sales recruiting, as in sales itself, "retention is the king of growth".

What you can do

- **Initial onboarding:** Invest in 1:1, in-depth time to adjust your training path.
- **Establish SSLAs:** Sales Service Level Agreements give clarity of "quid pro quo".
- **Invest early and often:** Provide reps with the training and tools they need to succeed.

#52 Hire and fire for attitude

A Leadership IQ study tracked 20k new hires over three years. 46% of them failed within 18 months. Only 11% of that was due to a lack of functional, technical and/or industry expertise.

89% failed due to a lack of coachability, motivation and temperament. In short, attitude.

What you can do

- **Urgent curiosity:** Look for people asking smart questions, not polished answers.
- **Hunger and drive:** Sales is hard. Startups are hard. People need to be OK with this.
- **Coachability:** Look for people with no ego and a high willingness to learn.

#53 VP Sales does not = VP Sales

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#54 Selling the sales position

"The war for sales talent is over. Talent has won" (Dirk Schuran).

I fail to understand why CEOs and Sales Leaders think hiring sales principles do not apply.

Hiring is just like sales, just with an LTV (Lifetime Value) of 100k to 1 million, aka "Enterprise Deal".

What you can do

- **Transfer insights:** Why not adapt that quiz and video sales letter for hiring?
- **Value before price:** Stop putting 20 or more bullets of what you want. Offer an opportunity.
- **Investment not costs:** Pay a sales rep 250k a year if they bring in 1 to 1.5 million. Why not?

#55 If it's not hell yeah, it's a no

"If you want to screw up at scale, you need IT." Nope, recruiting works perfectly fine for that. Especially for sales. Because salespeople represent your company to the outside world.

Resist the temptation to hire talent which is "kind of, like, basically OK, it might work".

What you can do

- **Determine No-Gos:** Rigidly execute if a candidate fails a critical litmus test.
- **Get a team red:** Get one or two people to play devil's advocate trying to "kill the deal".
- **Give people authority:** Any team member can give a veto (proposal) to not hire the rep.

#56 Aspire to build the A-Team

A-players attract A+ players. B-players attract C-players. C-players make A-players leave.

Your startup is "only" a bunch of hungry, humble, hands-on people who "make or break it".

After all, let's be honest: your "cutting-edge tech" can be done by a billion-dollar company.

What you can do

- **Think of the A-Team:** Hannibal, Faceman, B.A. and Murdock are worth more than 20 B-players.
- **Think of elite sports:** You don't need 100 soccer players to win the game. Just 11.
- **Think of complexity:** Getting into alignment is much easier with 10 than 100 people.

#57 Hire like you sell, but better

The people you hire are your company. Hiring is therefore not a side-activity to delegate.

Invest the focus, time and energy that winning A-players deserve and require.

Believe in what you're investing to win customers. Then double-down to win sales talent.

What you can do

- **Opportunity first:** Offer a scarce, unique chance to "join a rocket ship".
- **Hiring = CEO priority:** The CEO should always be involved in the hiring process.
- **Hire out of strength:** Don't hire when you're desperate, but when you're doing well.

#58 Curate collaborative competition

"If you can, hire four reps. Two might fail, and you need two or more to compete" (Serial Entrepreneur).

With only one person per role, you never know if it is the person or another variable that works.

With two or more people per role, they will push each other to get better, learn and stay hungry.

What you can do

- **Position Contracts:** Write the OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) you expect to cover.
- **Gamify to motivate:** Run competitions of who wins the most SQLs in a week.
- **Team, not family:** Clarify you're building a high-performing team, not a family.

#59 If you don't know what you want, don't hire

Founder: "I don't want to do sales myself, so I plan to hire somebody else to do "it" for me."

Me: "What exactly do you mean by "it"?" (Because this determines who you need to hire...)

Founder: "I don't know, validate markets, generate leads, close deals, build a team?"

What you can do

- **Don't hire too early:** If you are before product-market-fit, sale reps might not help.
- **Don't hire too senior:** Senior talent is expensive. And often not used to prospecting.
- **Don't hire "anybody":** Be crystal clear of what you expect from a hire.

#60 Sales pays salaries, but if it doesn't do so three to six times, stop

B2B SaaS sales compensation is typically based on four to eight times OTE (On Target Earnings).

This means if you pay a sales rep 100k, that person should generate 400-800k.

But sales reps should pay at least themselves, an engineer and ops function (finance, COO...).

What you can do

- **Get lead gen right:** Reps ramp faster, qualify better and close more with further leads.
- **Don't "over hire" AEs:** Only hire more "closers" if you have enough leads for them.
- **Keep reps focused:** Sales' job is not to show up, but to generate SQLs and revenue.

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6 Build customer success

#61 Value that works

"Customers rarely buy what you sell." If customers value A of your offering, focus on A.

And double-down on improving and providing more A instead of trying to sell them X, Y and Z.

Your customer doesn't care if you have 27 features to offer. They might need just two.

What you can do

- **Ask for the one thing:** Ask "what is the one single reason why you work with us?"
- **Ask P/M-Fit question:** Ask "how disappointed would you be if we'd stop to exist?"
- **Ask value drivers:** Ask "what characteristics do you appreciate most about us?"

#62 Maintain your track record

Me: "What are your Monthly Churn, NRR (Net Revenue Retention) and NPS looking like?"

Founder: "I haven't got a clue. What do you even mean by NRR? How should I know?

Everybody measures "new logos", bookings and revenue. Few rarely master the above from the beginning.

What you can do

- **Start simple:** Start a spreadsheet to track the above key metrics.
- **Gather simple:** Set up five to 20-minute calls, ask two to five questions and use a structured form.
- **Take action:** Set specific OKRs, e.g. "Reduce monthly churn -> Get to 5%".

#63 Challenge churn constantly

Achieving greater than 100% Net Revenue Retention should be a top priority for any B2B SaaS startup.

This cannot be achieved and sustained in a one-off initiative, but through an ongoing effort.

Constantly ideating, validating and improving ways to reduce churn is worth every cent.

What you can do

- **Churn hackathon:** Get out of the operational business and gather ideas.
- **Root cause analysis:** Understanding why customers churn before taking action.
- **Lifetime > MRR:** Optimise to work longer, even if less intense with customers.

#64 Raving customers refer happily

The number and quality of your referrals are based on the enthusiasm of your customers.

There are a few offerings that I referred around 10 times in the last six months, without expecting a reward.

Because I get tremendous value from them, love and trust them.

What you can do

- **Leverage trust:** Make sure you build trust for people to "risk" their reputation.
- **Leverage highlights:** Ask customers for a referral in a moment when they are super happy.
- **Leverage simplicity:** Make it easy for customers to refer you.

#65 Care and cheer for your customers

A company is (or should be) a happy customer factory. And you should be happy with them.

If you make customers successful, they will like you.

If you truly care and cheer for them, they will love you.

What you can do

- **Be there for them:** Pick up the phone if they call, even if it is not in their SLA (service level agreement).
- **Endorse them:** Like / comment / share LinkedIn posts, articles.
- **Care for them:** Appreciate customers as human beings and as relationships.

#66 "Fire" customers who are not a good fit

I disagree with "ABC – Always Be Closing".

There are prospects who are a pain in the a** during the sales process.

If you "succeed" at closing them, what kind of customers do you expect them to be?

What you can do

- **Validate with ICP:** If a company is way outside your ICP, tell them early on.
- **Validate objectives:** If you are not the best person to help them, tell them openly.
- **Validate culture:** If their and your culture are incompatible, raise it candidly.

#67 Hunters and farmers are different

"Our sales reps take care of lead generation, but also customer success."

The mindset to go "from zero to customers" versus "from a good to great existing customer" is different.

Even if a person is skilled at hunter sales and customer success, doing both is a challenge at best.

What you can do

- **Craft jobs to be done:** Set clear KPIs (SQLs, Bookings, Churn) per position.
- **Split early and clearly:** Once you have two people, split roles before/after signing a deal.
- **Incentivise wisely:** Recognise that Customer Success Managers are different.

#68 Invest in long-term relationships

I love playing long-term games with long-term people, on one level, as a human being. But it also pays off.

Especially in SaaS, your initial deal is less important than your Customer Lifetime Value.

Which is why you want to think in two to five years or more time-horizons instead of quarterly quotas.

What you can do

- **Set expectations:** Make it clear that you're not "in this to get rich quick".
- **Set anchors:** Set a minimum contract duration of three, or better six or 12 months.
- **Set incentives:** Make sure your reps "get it" by compensating them accordingly.

#69 Do what you say, say what you do

There are sales reps with an "AUA mindset - Anhauen, Umhauen, Abhauen".

They are a huge pain for customer success as they make promises that are hard to deliver.

Integrity is a key trait for sales, so keep your people accountable to deliver on their promises.

What you can do

- **Product marketing:** Over-communicate with your sales team on your market offering.
- **Create collaboration:** Sales multiplied by customer success should never have siloed functions.
- **Pay on net revenue:** Only pay commissions once cash is in the bank.

#70 A company should be a Happy Customer Factory

"We maximise profitable growth from super-happy customers."

But if in doubt, do you save an existing customer from churning or double ARR with another customer?

If you have three customers with an NPS (net promoter score) feedback of four, seven and 10, who do you call first?

What you can do

- **Understand first:** Start with a Status Quo Assessment to stop flying blindly.
- **Prioritise second:** Be clear if growth, profitability or happiness is priority no. 1.
- **Act consistently:** Establish clear guidelines when to invest what into customers.

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7 Learn from the best

#71 Reading has raving returns

Reading allows you to learn from the best in the world.

Anytime. Anywhere. At low investment.

It has raving returns. But very few people do it.

What you can do

- **Just start:** Here are 21 sales books, pick three, in two weeks you must commit to reading one.
- **Ask for referrals:** As for customers, ask people you trust what you should read.
- **Take action:** Take actionable ideas from a book, close it and implement.

#72 There is no point in dying slowly

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, get help.

There are so many sources to learn from people who've "been there, done that".

Use them to not repeat avoidable mistakes. There are enough new ones left to make.

What you can do

- **Ego is the enemy:** Don't take pride in "knowing everything and never needing help".
- **Ask early and often:** Don't "wait and see for just a few more months" before adapting.
- **Take the plunge:** Startups require making decisions while facing uncertainty.

#73 Learn in minutes instead of weeks

Learning is not a linear journey. "Getting it" can take you years of trial and error.

"Just practice for 10,000 hours" is not the answer. Learning "sustainable hacks" is.

This is because you cannot afford to strive for mastery and wait for results for years to come.

What you can do

- **Get the basics right:** Understand, validate, execute. Only then scale and automate.
- **Ask at the right depth:** The quality of your questions determines the quality of learning.
- **Occam's Razor:** Everything done with more that can be done with less is in vain.

#74 No startup died of too little advice

The problem in SaaS startup sales and startups in general is not receiving too little input.

Everyone and their grandmother seem to be an "expert" on what you should do next.

Which is why it is crucial to distil the 1-5% of advice that is moving the needle for you.

What you can do

- **Vet for track record:** Has the "expert" been successful in their field of "expertise"?
- **Vet for validation:** Can you validate quickly if the proposed advice works out?
- **Vet for no intent:** What is the genuine intent of the person providing advice?

#75 Strive for status alignment

A lot of SaaS startup founders and sales leaders I meet are too timid to ask CEOs for input.

They either behave arrogantly to "not show weakness" or are too shy to be taken seriously.

But in your field, you must establish a high status for your micro-niche at least.

What you can do

- **Avoid Beta traps:** Evaluate situational Alpha and Beta. Always be Alpha.
- **Be(come) the prize:** Establish yourself as at least an eye-level peer within your space
- **Leverage your team:** Your CEO <-> Their CEO, your / their finance person etc.

#76 Execute in hours instead of months

80% of work is often 100% perfect in a startup. Because you need to gather data first.

No matter how "solid" and "perfect" your business plan is, it will not work flawlessly in reality.

Because in theory, theory and reality are the same. In reality, they are not.

What you can do

- **Conduct mini experiments:** Define two to five questions, talk to 25 people, adjust your approach.
- **Batch activities:** Power Hours to write five LinkedIn posts or 10 cold calls.
- **Launch early and often:** Don't wait "until your approach is perfect / ready / validated".

#77 Learn from recorded conversations

Books are amazing for deep learning. But they are static.

Podcasts, YouTube interviews and recorded sales calls are more dynamic.

They allow you to also learn from ongoing conversations between two or more people.

What you can do

- **Record your calls:** Learn from your own mistakes and successes.
- **Listen to podcasts:** Podcasts work with your hands full, eyes closed on the go.
- **Start a podcast:** This gives you a reason to invite your heroes to talk to you.

#78 World-class competitors have coaches

I know zero world champions without a coach. Zero.

Because becoming world-class, better than your competitors, is hard. Really hard.

Not only to gain the right knowledge and actions, but also accountability, mental health and more.

What you can do

- **Trust the process:** Let your coach "play Team Red" and ask you hard questions.
- **Gain accountability:** Even if a coach is functionally bad, they'll keep you accountable.
- **Optimise for loyalty:** Get a coach you don't want to let down, especially if things get hard.

#79 Don't play status games with status people

There is a lot of "Startup Porn" out there of awards, closed funding rounds and more.

Everybody seems to be growing like crazy, always doing well and seemingly rarely facing problems.

But trust me, every B2B SaaS startup is going through a lot of trouble to go from zero to 20 million ARR.

What you can do

- **Stop comparing:** Focus on getting 1% better every day with you as a reference.
- **Stay grounded:** Don't worry about Startup Porn, just stay focused and execute.
- **Be(come) "real":** Be candid about your challenges, ask for help and get support.

#80 There is no point of being average in sales

Startups are hard. Sales is hard. Both together is... harder than both individually.

All the Top 1% salespeople I know go the extra mile to make their work pay off.

They do so selectively while staying incredibly focused to go "from good to great".

What you can do

- **Embrace RGA:** Focus on Revenue Generating Activities (RGA).
- **Embrace closing:** Closing is less than 10% of your time, but 100% of your revenue.
- **Embrace learning:** You win or you learn. Learn from lost deals, feedback and others.

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8 Closing Thoughts

B2B SaaS startup sales can be rough, confusing, draining, frustrating and exhilarating.

It can also be tremendously exciting, rewarding, enjoyable, humbling and even fun.

But all things considered, it seems important to keep perspective on what really matters.

#81 Life is not a zero-sum game

"You can have anything in life if you help others get 10 times what it is that you want". (Unknown)

If you close deals and make millions does not mean that somebody else gets less.

It most often means that you're scaling your positive impact on the world.

What you can do

- **Bake a bigger pie:** Focus on generating maximum value. The rest will follow.
- **Co-sell with others:** Help your buyer champion, a partner and your reps sell better.
- **Embrace referrals:** A referral from you can be life-changing for a person. Do it.

#82 Money is only keeping score

The goal of sales is not to make money. It is to create value for others and capture a part of it.

Money is only keeping score on the value you create for others. Never forget that.

This also means if you are a millionaire with integrity, you probably created a ton of value.

What you can do

- **Focus on 10x:** Look for customers where you can generate a real 10 times ROI.
- **Focus on value:** Identify value creation first before thinking about your offer.
- **Focus on integrity:** Do what you say. Don't overpromise, don't underdeliver.

#83 Give first what you want to receive later

If you want to make money, help others make money first.

If you are unsure whether to trust a prospect, partner or talent, ask how you can build trust first.

If you are unwilling to take the risk of committing to a deal, why should a prospect commit?

What you can do

- **Overdeliver:** "You didn't need to do that, I didn't expect it" is great feedback.
- **"Screw" reciprocity:** Help others proactively without expecting anything in return.
- **Become "the MVP":** Aim to always be the "Most Valuable Player" in your ecosystem.

#84 Being successful is hard. Being unsuccessful is harder

You will ask yourself many times on this journey called startup if it is all worth it.

To make that third follow up call, to re-record that Video Sales Letter, to go the extra mile.

But investing 80% of your focus, time and energy into your work, you will be unsuccessful.

What you can do

- **Hard now, easy later:** If two choices seem equal, take the one that is hard today.
- **Think long-term:** Aim to make 10 million in a decade instead of six-figures a year.
- **It's only business:** Never forget that business is that. "Just" business.

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BONUS: 25 Tactical B2B Sales Insights

Implement 5 Quick Wins within 48 hours at EUR 0 investment

1. **Implement a Discovery and Qualification Quiz:** Do yourself and your prospects the favour of serious preparation when you invest time. If a prospect is not willing to invest two minutes of preparation into a 30 to 60-minute conversation, how likely are they to invest a four- to six-figure amount of money in you?
2. **Automate meeting scheduling properly:** The initial appointment setting is part of the customer experience. Stop wasting your time with meeting scheduling! Use your CRM or Calendly. Set a clear agenda which sends reminders automatically.
3. **Leverage LinkedIn more:** Connect with 20 people every day. Automate it wherever useful. Post three to five times per week. Consistency is hard but the key to success. Create an accountability system. WhatsApp and Slack groups work. Outbound Sales in DACH.
4. **Leverage video more:** Everybody gets (too many) emails each day. Very few people get personalised videos. Use LinkedIn native video via your Mobile App once connected to people. Use VSLs (Video Sales Letters) to follow-up after sales calls and for offer walkthroughs. And yes, it is uncomfortable. But you put success before comfort… right?
5. **Get a word-by-word sales script:** Proven, word-by-word sales scripts can be one of your most powerful sales assets. It is also something really hard to do, especially if you have never done it before. Which is why I'm glad to share these Communication Templates with you here.

Sell Innovative Offerings Better

6. **Sell use cases instead of technology:** People buy transformations, so invest in deeply understanding their challenges, target outcomes, why they haven't yet fixed their challenges and what they believe in.
7. **Use "Novelty Chunking":** New technology is intriguing and often enabling people to interact with you. But it also means change, change is risk, and people hate risk. Make it "plain vanilla" as in "everything remains as is" and chunk all your novelty into a single Unique Selling Proposition (USP) describing why your offering is fixing a problem that people haven't been able to fix without you.

8. **Speak like your niche:** Invest in deeply understanding the wording, culture and beliefs your (target) customers use. Build a customer advisory board to validate how new offerings in particular are perceived by the market.
9. **Focus on the buyer journey:** Buyers don't need to "get" your innovative approach. But they need to understand their buyer journey and how they can execute on it with the least amount of friction, time investment and risk.
10. **Validate your status quo thesis:** People will only buy from you if you can help them to establish a shared belief of how the world works. You need to make sure people believe in cloud solutions versus on-premises, subscriptions versus one-off, AI versus rule-based approaches first. Only if people trust the mechanism should you even start to explain why your solution is the best one to execute it.

Consider Local Specifics for Outbound Sales in DACH

11. **Use Social Proof:** Use relevant case studies, quotes, and customer testimonials instead of Anglicisms, acronyms, technical terms and "Us / We / I / Our" sales pitches
12. **Localise small things:** "DACH" is not a "territory". Even Zurich and Bern are different. For example, use "Moin" for Hamburg, "Servus" for Vienna, "Grüezi" for Zürich
13. **Get the salutation right:** Take the time to write "Guten Morgen Frau…". The easiest way to handle this is by setting up one campaign per profile (e.g. "CH CIOs Financial Services 10,000+ FTEs M"), duplicating the campaign and transferring all contacts of the other gender and marking it up with M / F for Male / Female (--> CH… F).
14. **Be polite, but specific:** "Mit wem könnte ich dazu sprechen?" Instead of "Hit reply", "Per Du" does not work for KMUs and Corporates in DACH, especially if the target company has a "Per Sie" culture internally.
15. **Spray and Pray:** DSGVO / GDPR is real, so invest in small, carefully curated campaigns of 20-40 people with (nearly) identical profiles and avoid campaigns of 100+ people (without previously validating the mechanism and achieving 70%+ Opening and 20%+ Reply Rates).

Avoid losing prospects by being "ghosted"

16. **Be consistent on Date In-Date Out:** ALWAYS schedule the next synchronous activity (call or meeting) on the call / meeting itself. This saves you a lot of mental stress thanks to CRM reminders and reduces the risk of getting "ghosted".
17. **Use Pattern Interrupts:** If people don't answer your third call attempt, don't call three more times. Instead send them a LinkedIn video message, write them an email with a high value "nugget" such as for their space-relevant article, or even send them a WhatsApp.

18. **Use a Soft Break-Up:** Write an email along the lines of this, switching gears to not chase the prospect and not appear needy while leaving the door open to reconnect later: "Since I still did not get any feedback from you, I just assume that the topic has no priority for you right now. That is completely fine, and I will just get back in touch with you in two to three months."
19. **Establish a Status Delta:** Be clear from the beginning that you do not desperately need this specific customer, but instead offer a prospect the opportunity to gain three to 10 times ROI. If they feel they are not a fit, encourage them if you see the world the same way. At the same time, showcase how other similar companies or competitors are experiencing success from investing in your offering.
20. **Ask Simple Questions:** Write something along the lines of: "It seems you are really busy, which is why I don't expect your answer to these questions, but I thought they would be useful for you to form your opinion:

    • *What is the financial, operational and, for you, personal impact if you do not fix the discussed challenges within the next six months?*

    • *What would need to be the case for you to take action immediately because it would mean a 10x or higher ROI for you without significant risk?"*

Negotiate better by framing the conversation

21. **Control the Frame:** Stronger frames always absorb weaker frames. Be aware which frames are and should be used: Power, Intrigue, Time, Analyst, Prizing, Moral Authority
22. **Always be Alpha:** Differentiate between global and local status and situational Alpha and Beta positions. Avoid "Beta Traps" such as corporates framing their power by comparing their vast financial resources, global brands and decade-spanning experience. Be confident about why you exist and challenge incumbents on why they then have not fixed a problem if they are so great (but do so politely…).
23. **Ask for No:** "No" as an answer is great. A "No" provides you with a great opportunity to increase the flow of information. People rarely justify why they say "Yes", but they do so almost automatically if they say "No".
24. **Avoid time pressure:** Decision-making under significant time constraints typically reduces decision quality. Put prospects at ease so that they can take all the time in the world to make up their mind. But also challenge them on the raised concern of "We just need to think about it" by asking exactly what they need to think about and how you can help them resolve any open points. A micro-script you can use in this situation is along the lines of:

    "Let's be honest with each other for a minute. We have both invested time, rigor and focus to evaluate if and how we can add value to each other's businesses. This means we find ourselves now in one of these three scenarios:

    A. *The discussed challenge is not worth solving. Let's all get back to work then and tackle more important and urgent challenges.*

B. *You have specific concerns that we did not yet resolve together or even talk about. Let's, in this case, have an open conversation on what these are and work together to timely resolve them.*

C. *There are no open points. Should we start to create operational value for you and your business right away?"*

25. **Avoid Neediness:** Neediness is (besides Ego) the enemy. Neediness destroys trust because people feel your intent is inwards-oriented to solve your own problems instead of being 100% focused on the prospect's problem. Neediness also destroys your Status Delta immediately as you are acting out of need instead of opportunity.

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The End... but Still and Always Day 1

"Sales pays salaries."

"Startups that sell are startups that scale."

"We build shit and we sell shit, and everything else is bullshit."

These are all snappy quotes. And I am convinced that they are a true. They need to be embraced and remembered at all times by many tech founders.

I love B2B sales so much not because it pays well. Or because I can talk a lot on the job. Or because as a job it will always be there, even when most other jobs are redundant.

I love B2B sales so much because it is at the core of learning, caring and making things happen. To help other people solve their problems and have an amazing life. If you don't care about helping people, you should not be in sales.

Your job is to learn as much as you can about your customers, their situations, their objectives, their challenges. What have they tried in the past, what they value from a collaboration and so many other things. Only then will you have the empathy required to build long-term, honest, trusted relationships.

A "Still Day 1" mindset is essential not only in B2B sales, but in life.

I hope you learnt something reading these pages and are excited about what's still to come.

I also wanted to keep this e-book really short to help you learn in minutes instead of days.

That being said, I want to provide you with as much free value here as possible.

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