

Distributors: Three strategies to improve sales alignment with manufacturing partners

If you're a distributor that partners with manufacturers, odds are that a few of them generate and share sales leads with you.

This indirect sales distribution model has numerous benefits for both you and the manufacturer.

You obtain sales leads at little or no marketing expense, and the manufacturer enjoys expanded market share without the time and expense of hiring and training sales force.

Win-win, right?

What should be a symbiotic relationship with a manufacturer, however, can rapidly devolve into something much more chaotic, and much less lucrative.

Distributor-manufacturer relationships frequently struggle to operate within a defined process. Lead qualification criteria, two-way flow of information, and proactive engagement are often woefully lacking, which leads to end-of-quarter sales numbers that are less attractive than they could be.

Common communication-based hurdles like these create serious inefficiencies that can have a serious financial impact. When information for everything from lead status to lead quality isn't easily seen as it happens by everyone involved — potential sales inevitably fall through the cracks and revenue gets left on the table.

Here are 3 ways to achieve better sales alignment with your manufacturers:

1. Define the process, and then standardize it.

Think in terms of both how leads are shared from a single manufacturer as well as how you aggregate and organize them across multiple manufacturers. The key to prioritizing follow-up and tracking progress is a single view of all potential sales leads, regardless of the source.

2. Determine your shared lead qualification process.

Getting this right can be as straightforward as identifying certain industries, roles, or even contact information. Lead qualification can be further improved by enhancing generated leads with additional contextual information like zip code, SIC code, company size and other information that helps you better prioritize and engage the best leads.

3. Maintain a two-way flow of information.

Critical to manufacturer/distributor sales alignment is regular and routine feedback on the quality, status, and other action items on every shared lead. Without this closed-loop process in place, leads more easily enter no man's land, where pipeline visibility is nearly impossible.

But I work with dozens of manufacturers — all of which have different processes and systems for lead sharing and follow-up?

Exactly.

The way to bring multiple entities into a single process is to adopt a shared platform. This enables distributors and their manufacturing partners to rapidly and easily share leads and to communicate about lead status and quality.

This proactive engagement approach helps distributors sell more — much more, in fact. You might have heard that portals can bridge this gap, but in reality the opposite is true. A portal or similar "static" destination that requires a log-in typically suffers from underutilization and outdated information. It's just one more burdensome task to add to the daily laundry list.

By contrast, a push-based notification system that leverages email is a rapid and easy way to communicate the acceptance of a lead or the creation of an opportunity. With it, you can build a hassle-free, and optimized, sales process where everyone benefits.