

5.4: Using IMC in the Sales Process

What you'll learn to do: explain how IMC tools support the sales process

As you know very well by now, in every successful transaction, there's a buyer and a seller.

The consumer behavior module of this course describes the decision process consumers go through when they decide to buy something. From the seller's perspective, there is a parallel sales process that companies use to clarify the things they must do to successfully move buyers through their decision process.

In this section of the course, we will examine this sales process and the role of integrated marketing communication in supporting it.

The specific things you'll learn in this section include:

- Describe the sales process
- Provide examples of how IMC tools can support various stages of the sales process

Through the Looking Glass: Understanding the Sales Process

Up to this point, we've emphasized the importance of getting into the minds of customers in order to market to them effectively. The consumer decision-making process outlines key stages people go through when they make purchasing decisions. Now we're going to step through the proverbial looking glass to examine that same process from the seller's point of view.



Why is this helpful? For a sale to occur, the buyer needs to move through the decision making process successfully. To help the buyer do that, the seller needs to provide information and assistance along the way. For some products and services, such as those that employ personal selling, the seller's role is very hands-on. For other product and services, particularly ones in low-involvement decisions, the seller's role may be fairly hands-off. In either case, though, it's helpful for marketers to understand the sales process that happens alongside the consumer decision-making process.

The role of marketing is to work in the middle ground between these processes, providing tools that facilitate the customer's movement through the decision-making process **and** tools that help people responsible for sales *close deals*. When marketers take an IMC approach to this challenge, they can develop timely, well-coordinated marketing tools that effectively support both processes.

The Seller's Viewpoint

The sales process starts with determining where to focus attention and then turns to relationship building and information sharing to help prospective customers reach a buying decision. The figure below lists the five stages of the sales process that correspond to the five stages of the consumer decision-making process.

PARALLEL PROCESSES: BUYING AND SELLING



Stage 1: Generate and Qualify Leads

The first step in the sales process is to find sales leads. A *lead* is a person who expresses some interest in learning more about a product or service. But just being interested isn't enough to warrant the full attention of the seller. Leads must also be qualified. In other words the seller needs to confirm that the lead actually has a recognized need for the offering and the ability to pay for it. Once a prospect meets these criteria, the goal from both the marketing and sales point of view is to move the person successfully through the decision process.

Stage 2: Build Relationship and Discover Needs

At the same time consumers are searching for information about how to address their needs, sellers are searching for information about the consumers and what they looking for. At this stage a true buyer-seller relationship starts to form: the seller reaches out and probes in order to understand buyer needs. The seller also begins to position herself as a trusted resource to help address these needs. The buyer begins to understand that the seller may indeed be able to provide what he is looking for.

Stage 3: Present Solution and Resolve Concerns

Once a seller understands the needs of a qualified lead, she can effectively present the product or service as a solution to those needs. She has insight into the buyer and understands which features and benefits are most important. She can position the offering accordingly. It is important to present the solution at the same time the consumer is formulating and evaluating alternatives. Inevitably this evaluation process will raise potential concerns and reservations about the solution. The seller surfaces these issues and provides additional information to resolve them.

Stage 4: Close the Sale

At this late stage of the sales process, the buyer is engaged in getting the best deal he can, while finally confirming that this decision is the best one. The seller is taking final steps to ensure that her solution is selected and that the purchase is completed. This may involve offering some final, crowning piece of information to instill confidence in the choice and move it over the finish line. It may also involve negotiating final deal terms, pricing, or providing incentives to finalize the decision.

Stage 5: Monitor and Follow Up

This final stage recognizes that closing the sale is a gateway into a new and deeper relationship: the active customer relationship. If the seller wants to retain this customer and potentially sell to him again in the future, it is important to invest in the relationship and make sure he is satisfied with his decision. The buyer hopes to quickly start enjoying the benefits of the new solution. The seller now takes responsibility for effectively delivering the solution. At this stage, if the seller is using personal selling techniques, there is often a personnel shift, and a colleague from customer service, solution delivery, or another team takes over for the seller. What doesn't change is the seller's vested interest in monitoring how the customer is doing, with an eye toward lifetime customer value.

Alignment between the Sales and Marketing Functions

The marketing and sales functions have common goals in helping to move prospective customers through the purchasing process successfully. Although the *sales process* is labeled with the term, "sales," in fact the sales and marketing teams collaborate to make the process effective. It is very common for the marketing team to be responsible for the first stage of the sales process, lead generation and qualification. Marketing may also be instrumental in initiating relationships with qualified leads, beginning to identify their needs and issues, and sharing useful information as buyers begin to seek solutions to their problems.

Often the marketing team collaborates with the sales organization to develop appropriate tools for the later stages of the sales process, too. Solution presentations, product demonstrations, and other informational tools are all marketing communications artifacts. Marketers can ensure consistent positioning, messaging, and brand alignment when they work with sales team members to develop tools to support these stages of the process.

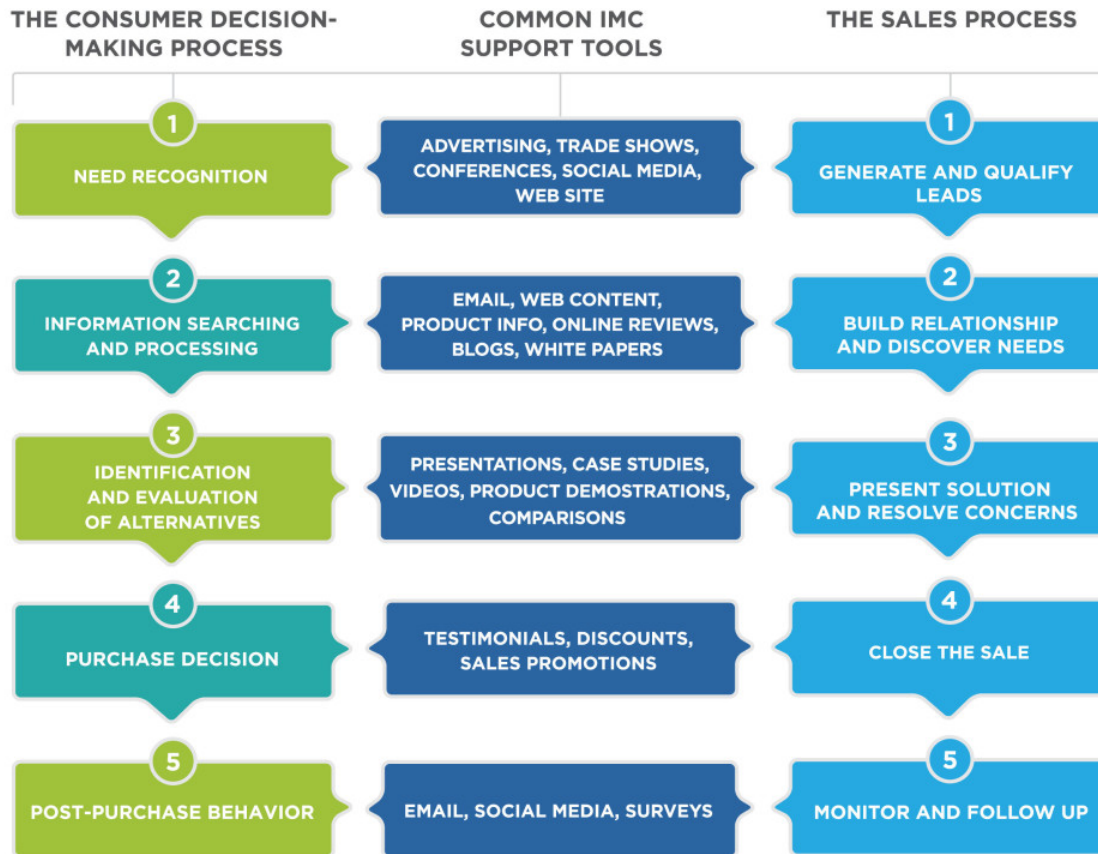
When no personal selling is involved, organizations may rely heavily on Web-based tools and interactions to support these stages of the buying process. Tools like videos, self-running product demonstrations, free product trials, case studies, and product comparisons might provide sufficient coverage to eliminate the need for dedicated salespeople. But here again, marketing plays a central role in developing and improving these tools, and in managing the process of connecting buyers to the information they need. Marketing automation tools can add significant power to organizational Web sites to assist with this process.

Fitting IMC into the Sales Process

So where does IMC fit in the sales process? Marketing communication tools serve as the fabric woven between the consumer decision-making process and the sales process. A common set of IMC tools is responsible for helping both processes function smoothly. Taking an IMC approach to supporting the sales process helps marketers think holistically about what's happening on the part of the buyer as well as the seller; a coordinated approach can make these parallel processes happen more effectively.

Various marketing communication tools lend themselves to each stage of the sales process, depending on the nature of the interaction between the seller and the buyer. Although a marketer could conceivably design any IMC tool to support any stage of the process, there are general patterns around the types of marketing communication tactics that work best at each stage, as illustrated in the figure below.

IMC SUPPORT FOR THE SALES PROCESS



Stage 1: Early in the sales process, optimal IMC tools are those that cast a wide net to build awareness about both the problem an organization's products and services address and its proposed solution(s). This stage is the widest in the so-called sales funnel. Ideally, organizations take a coordinated IMC approach to lead-generating activities, so that advertising, the Web site, conferences, trade shows, and social media activity all reinforce one another by using common messaging to share the value proposition.

Stage 2: With qualified leads in hand, the opportunity is ripe for IMC campaigns that target leads based on what they are looking for and their progression through the decision-making process. Electronic direct mail is often an essential tool at this stage. Web-site content should be carefully designed to support prospective customers' "information search" processes effectively. By monitoring contacts' progression, the organization can provide additional materials as needed to keep people interested and engaged.

Stage 3: When a contact recognizes that he wants to give serious consideration to the company's products or services, a very solution-focused set of IMC tools come to the fore. Tools such as presentations, case studies, videos, product comparisons, demonstrations, and free trial offers are all designed to help prospective customers understand the product features and benefits they will enjoy. These tools and the process for accessing them can be built into a coherent campaign that moves people easily from stage to stage as they learn more.

Stage 4: When the buyer and the seller home in on the final selection process and specific terms for sale, another set of IMC tools can be particularly useful. Testimonials and references from satisfied, successful customers can play a powerful role in pushing a decision across the finish line. At times, offering sales promotions and discounts can make the difference between signing now vs. months from now. By applying an IMC approach to supporting the entire sales process, this stage can feel like a crowning validation of the chosen path, with all the other touch points leading to this point.

Stage 5: As the prospective customer becomes an actual customer, IMC tools like email and social media can help deepen and individualize the relationship. A new-customer-orientation IMC campaign, for example, might provide the kickstart a customer needs to move ahead successfully. Online surveys and other feedback tools can engage new customers to monitor how they are doing and confirm that they are experiencing the value they expect.

Case Study: IMC and Zombie Apocalypse Supporting the Sales Process

In 2013, it was the height of America's fixation with zombies. The hit TV show *The Walking Dead* was a popular obsession, and the highly anticipated summer blockbuster was the zombie-filled action-horror film *World War Z*. At the time, Christine Nurnberger was a new-to-the-job vice president of marketing. She had been challenged by her boss to breathe excitement into the ho-hum reputation of SunGard Availability Services (SunGard AS), a B2B company that helps organizations improve their IT infrastructure to avoid service outages and plan for disaster recovery.

Tapping into the zeitgeist, Nurnberger hit on an almost crazy idea for an integrated marketing campaign: "What better way to convey our message around the importance of having a resilient business infrastructure than to test it by seeing if you could survive a zombie apocalypse."^[1]

Almost crazy, but not quite. Nurnberger set her team to designing a pilot to test the concept with a small number of corporate chief information officers who were in later stages of the buying process. This first phase of the IMC campaign used direct mail. Marketers sent a flash drive to the CIOs, informing them of the imminent zombie apocalypse and telling them to stay tuned for a backpack of survival materials, which arrived a few days later. Sales representatives followed up with sales calls, and they were elated to find their CIO sales leads enthusiastic about the creative zombie campaign and open to talking business, as well. The campaign gave sales reps the perfect opportunity to discuss the company's offerings and innovation and address concerns about the perception of SunGard AS as a stodgy "dinosaur" in the IT world.

The first wave went so well that the marketing team expanded the campaign to additional audiences in ways that impacted multiple stages of the sales funnel:

- **All stages:** A version of the campaign targeting industry analysts and influencers with a message about the company's recent updates and innovation. This effort resulted in positive social media posts from analysts about SunGard AS and the campaign. This helped bolster the SunGard AS brand and generate further interest at each stage of the sales process.
- **Stage 1:** A social media campaign and zombie-apocalypse backpack giveaway were initiated to build awareness and generate new leads.
- **Stages 1 and 2:** A targeted campaign to generate, qualify, and educate new leads among IT decision makers was developed using email, direct mail, and Web-site content.
- **Stages 2 and 3:** A second targeted campaign focused on recontacting promising sales leads who had stalled during the sales process to restart conversations with SunGard AS. Coordinated IMC elements in this campaign included email, direct mail, personal selling, Web-site content, and social media.

In the following video, Christine Nurnberger explains the approach behind the IMC campaign (including the zombie apocalypse backpack), how her team executed different phases, and the results of the campaign.



1. <http://www.marketingsherpa.com/article/case-study/zombie-themed-campaign-sungard> ←

CC licensed content, Original

- Using IMC in the Sales Process. **Provided by:** Lumen Learning. **License:** [CC BY: Attribution](#)

CC licensed content, Shared previously

- Handshake. **Authored by:** Chuck Patch. **Located at:** <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chuckp/252924532/>. **License:** [CC BY-NC: Attribution-NonCommercial](#)

All rights reserved content

- How Zombies Helped Deliver the Right Message to the Right Audience at the Right Time. **Authored by:** MarketingSherpa. **Located at:** <https://youtu.be/kmMU6gGa5ZE>. **License:** *All Rights Reserved*. **License Terms:** Standard YouTube license

5.4: Using IMC in the Sales Process is shared under a [not declared](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.