Crucial Conversations

What is getting in the way
of your revenue growth?
And what can you do about it?

The Sales COACH
Enhanced Performance. Delivered.

Thank You For Your Interest

The difficulties of selling in a complex B2B landscape are well documented. They include: gaining access and time, assessing and managing the differing requirements of multiple stakeholders (on both sides), engaging a more educated and informed buyer and maintaining momentum and a focus on mutual value throughout an often-protracted buying process. Even in 'good times', sellers have their work cut out. In our 'new-normal' hybrid working environment with adverse macro factors, it's simply more challenging to execute.

We have seen that success in complex B2B sales comes down to a series of interactions – we refer to these as 'crucial conversations'. When orchestrated well, these conversations enable the free flow of information between both parties, creating mutual value and driving revenue growth. Conversely, we have also witnessed thousands of conversations that are ineffective; typically where sellers talk too much or focus on themselves rather than the client. Sometimes, they are having the wrong conversation altogether!

Are your people talking themselves out of deals?

Over the next few pages, we'll share the conversational challenges we are seeing and, more importantly, what makes for effective conversations.

Les Bailey, Director of The Sales Coach Network

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10 Crucial Conversations

In complex B2B environments, sales can't be automated or pushed online – there are simply too many variables. Often, multiple personnel on both sides still need to be involved. Every organisation we speak to has invested, to varying degrees, in a system of success to drive consistency and more repeatable, predictable and sustainable revenue performance. This applies to individual contributors, multidisciplinary teams and across the business as a whole.

Here's the challenge: regardless of your 'tech stack', enablement tools, client value stories, efficient processes and operations, exhaustive performance data and revenue metrics, all of which are all highly valuable, achieving your desired outcome comes down to the quality of the conversations your people have with your buyers. The rapport they establish, the level of trust they create and their ability to foster a positive environment where there is a 'free flow of quality information' from both sides are all vital.

All parties know when conversations are going well, and can feel it when they hit a roadblock. The **10 Crucial Conversations** described on the following pages are not the only conversations your teams need to have, nor do they happen in a defined order. They are sometimes repeated or cut short to be picked up later. Our role as sellers is to steer and manage the conversations and to know which conversation we are having, executing well at every stage. However, it is misguided to believe we can control them. By definition, they involve two or more people exchanging ideas and information.

1. Opening Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

The opening conversation is pivotal. We need to demonstrate our credibility and our intent (to add value and be client-centric), build rapport and trust and share a value hypothesis while educating with a relevant and insightful point of view.

All too often, we see sellers 'winging it'. "We can't know what they want until we've spoken to them" is a dominant mindset.

As a result, the conversation is focused on the seller's organisation. They pitch their story and their credentials, making it all about them. Meanwhile the buyer leads the questions and directs the conversation. Any pre-meeting preparation and research is under-utilised and doesn't help focus the conversation on the buyer.

Typically, the information flow is one-sided and at the end of it, sellers 'feel good' because they spoke a lot, were asked a lot of questions and received some head nods. "They really liked it" or "they got it" are typical responses when sharing feedback to colleagues afterwards.

However, the relationship and mutual understanding has not advanced at all.

What Constitutes An Effective Conversation?

As ever, sellers should focus on the decision the client is making in that meeting. This is likely to be along the lines of 'Should we talk further?', and the criteria the buyer will use to make that decision.

Make the meeting about that decision. It's the focus of how you open, close and prepare the buyer prior to the meeting. The pre-sent agenda should be focused around enabling that simple yet important decision.

Presentation decks are a crutch and an obstruction to meaningful conversation. Sellers driving good opening conversations have a point of view, pithy and tailored credentials and value insights and the mindset of changing the conversation or pivoting back to the client's situation as soon as possible.

This demonstrates the seller's intent to focus on the client and their needs, and enables sellers to learn as much as possible about the buyer's environment and potential requirements.

The aim is to help the client answer the question, **'Should we be talking further?'**

2. Credentials Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

All too often, a standard 'intro deck' is used with a plethora of client logos and a significant 'about us' focus. Sellers tend to overplay their journey, their accolades, their teams, their mass marketing positioning and their USP.

Buyers see through all of this, and what is well intentioned by the seller often ends up being a distraction as to why you aren't a good fit for the buyer. For example, the 'logos' could be too close for comfort or they might be too different to the buyer. Or the buyer might question their structure. Your good intent can end up backfiring as it's not tailored or contextualised.

In the credentials conversation, less is more.

What Constitutes An Effective Conversation?

Credentials conversations flow throughout the pursuit. It is as much about how you show up and the questions you ask as it is about actual 'creds'. The introduction about your company should be focused on relevant aspects to the buyer and completed in less than a minute. Any client names or industry focused references should be supplemented with a bridge as to why it is relevant to them – you make the connection and cover and variance the client may see differently.

In essence, all credentials should be tailored and actively made relevant to the buyer; it cannot be assumed they will see the relevance in a positive light.

Keep it short and look to pivot to them as soon as possible. Your intent and focus on their value is the biggest credential.

3. Business Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

Most business value diagnostic conversations fail when the seller sees each one as a single conversation. Such conversations fail when they are set up as a 'discovery' meeting and the seller asks a lot of low value 'interrogating' questions. The seller finds something they think they can 'sell' to and then they move on.

Buyers talk with sellers all the time and seeking this 'pain' makes you turn up like every other seller – especially when you don't delve deeper into why it matters, how it shows up and the true value of addressing it (to them and the organisation).

Advice From...

Russ Houghton
Sales Coach And Facilitator

Initiating a discovery conversation with the right mindset sets the tone for a successful interaction. You should redirect the dialogue back to the client by asking 'high gain' (valuable) questions that reveal significant insights. Once you have focused the conversation on the client's challenges, your next task is to establish business value – either issues they are hoping to address or outcomes they are hoping to achieve.

Business value diagnostic conversations occur when the business case, budget, access to senior decision-makers, and the true qualification of the opportunity are confirmed. Once you have a list of challenges, you should delve deeper to explore (or mine) for value; quantify the impact of the change, ensure alignment within the organisation, and determine the overall value of the change.

Remember, these conversations will evolve as more stakeholders get involved, especially if you need to navigate higher up in the organisation. Ultimately, a successful business value diagnostic conversation hinges on your ability to continuously align your questions and insights with the client's evolving needs and objectives. Embracing this approach will ensure you stand out from other sellers and build stronger client relationships.

4. Solution Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

Effective sellers know their solutions inside out. As such, a solution conversation should be straightforward. The challenge is to hold it in an explorative, curious, engaging and client-centric manner. The conversation should explore the relevance and importance of different elements to the buyer, educating them about options and alternatives they may not have considered. You should seek to create a solution framework based on agreed requirements, while truly meeting the needs of the client. Too often it can become a conversation fraught with assumptions, guesswork and monologues.

What Constitutes An Effective Conversation?

A mindset of the top 5% of sellers is 'no guessing', and this is critical during solution-focused conversations with buyers. You can begin by working from a list of key client requirements before prioritising, expanding out and exploring what is important to them and the potential impact. This enables you to leverage your subject matter expertise and solution capability. Using this method is particularly effective when executed in collaboration with the client – aim to leverage this knowledge to find out from them what a perfect solution looks like.

5. Provider Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

Sellers often miss out the provider conversation, which establishes who your buyer wants to work with, which type of provider they are seeking and why. Do not assume that you are a good fit simply because your solution meets the buyer's requirements. Holding one of these conversations allows you to explore what is important to the buyer in all the softer 'ways of working', 'no surprises' and other administrative areas. It is important not to overlook these – they might add value to the buyer if explored.

What Constitutes An Effective Conversation?

A provider conversation is like any other diagnostic conversation. You should look to explore the factors that are important to the client. Build a list and then prioritise. Explore key areas, what they look like, and why these areas are important to the client. What benefits will they bring to the client? You can differentiate here by being curious and exploring the factors from your client's perspective.

6. Qualification Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

You should hold qualification conversations separately from solution conversations. Too often we see qualification focused on solution conversations, and then some additional buyer-led stages for the client to figure out whether or not they should move forward.

What Constitutes An Effective Conversation?

Top performers understand that qualification takes place over a series of conversations, including discussions around business value, individual value, solution value and provider value. This should be followed by an exploration of resources such as investment, client time, people and the political and strategic will to find a solution.

Advice From...

Aislinn McKibbin
Sales Coach And Facilitator

Effective qualification is an ongoing process, not a one-time conversation. Too often, sellers rush through qualification, eager to move onto solutioning, without thoroughly understanding if the opportunity is worth pursuing. My advice? Take the time to explore the full scope of your prospect's needs, resources, and internal dynamics. Qualification isn't just about confirming budget or timeline—it's about assessing alignment, commitment, and the strategic importance of the solution within their business.

A truly valuable qualification conversation digs deeper. Ask about internal priorities, potential obstacles, and what success looks like for the client. This helps you understand if they're a good fit and also strengthens your position as a trusted partner rather than just a vendor. Remember, a robust qualification process saves time and resources, and increases the likelihood of long-term success.

7. Money Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

Talking about money is something everyone needs to be comfortable with. After all, there should be a fair exchange of mutual value for your goods and services.

Don't fall on the 'back foot' and allow the client to lead the conversations – this is something you need to initiate.

In many cases, money conversations take place either far too early or far too late. It's also done in either an overly assertive or too apologetic manner, and is framed as a cost – the price or fee.

What Constitutes An Effective Conversation?

Top performers speak about money intentionally and at two key points. The first is once the business value of the change (addressing the problem or securing the results) has been identified. The second is before detailed solutioning (if that involves heavy resources), or 'pre-proposal' if solutioning is 'light'.

The key aspect is language and framing it as an 'investment' to achieve their desired business results or outcomes. Companies invest for value – they tend to 'cut costs'.

Advice From...

Les Gosling
Sales Coach And Facilitator

Having the correct conversation at the appropriate time and with the right person can have a huge impact on the outcome. The ability to talk about money is a skill that can improve and evolve through de-sensitisation. Confidence and competence with this skill only come with practice.

The language we use and confidence we demonstrate during these conversations is hugely important. Using language we are comfortable with and talking openly and transparently about money will help to strengthen the relationship with the client or prospect. If we have already identified and demonstrated our understanding of the value of our solution, discussions about money will flow logically.

Talk about 'level of investment' rather than 'price'. 'Investment' is typically associated with a 'return' and is therefore positive. 'Price' is usually associated with 'cost', which is perceived as negative, as people typically try to reduce costs.

Get comfortable with articulating large numbers clearly because the client/prospect will be. If they're not, then you're probably having the wrong conversation.

If they push back, talk from experience: "I see other organisations in similar situations tend to invest between________. Can you see your organisation investing in that range?"

8. Differentiation Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

Every situation is competitive. No decision or 'do nothing' is always an option. However, when there are other providers in the mix, we need to be ready for the 'Why should we chose you?' question.

Sellers can be caught off guard and their response often lacks credibility and confidence. At times it is not articulated well. Or the seller answers in a generic way, straight from the brochure or website value proposition, rather than conducting a tailored conversation with the client, focusing on the individual and circumstance.

Being prepared doesn't mean having a 'stock' response and talk track. It is a case of holding a two-way conversation about what the buyer values most.

Advice From...

Denis Rollet
Sales Coach And Facilitator

Engaging in differentiation conversations requires an understanding of what sets you apart. Buyers make choices based on differences, not similarities, and those differences only matter if they are important to the buyer. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is differentiation. Effective diagnostic conversations (both broad and deep) reveal what buyers value and where differentiation truly matters.

Top performers can articulate what sets them apart from competitors in a way that is distinct, relevant and memorable, using contrast to highlight their messaging. This differentiation should be valuable to the client and ideally validated by them before it appears in your final proposal.

In the early stages of the process, if you haven't gathered enough information about the client, it's beneficial to maintain a curious mindset. You might say: "When we ask our clients, they all mention different things. For some, it's our________, for others, it's the way we_________, and for others, it might even be_________. What are the attributes you are most interested in, so I can share how we are seen as different in those areas that matter to you?"

9. Decision Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

There are multiple decision conversations to consider. The outcome tends to be unsatisfactory when sellers believe that a decision conversation is **the** decision conversation – namely 'Will they sign?' The discussion becomes unnatural and the focus on the big decision can seem out of sync, especially when sellers are encouraged to 'ask for the business'. Have you or your people ever experienced one of the following scenarios?

1. You thought you had a great meeting and the client or prospect said something like: "That was really interesting, we'll get back to you…" but they never did.
2. You showed up for a meeting and the client was unprepared. At times you wondered whether you were even at the right meeting.
3. You came out of a meeting saying to yourself: "I'm going to have to do that all over again."

Scenarios such as these are too common and is symptomatic of poor planning and weak dialogue.

What Constitutes An Effective Conversation?

Effective sellers realise that **every** conversation is a decision conversation. Top performers plan every prospect or client interaction based on the Next Logical Decision for the client based on the client's best interests and criteria.

Whether we like it or not, clients are making a decision in every interaction: to spend more time exploring, to involve others, to secure budget, to build a business case, to take it to their senior and so on. All of these are client decision conversations we need to enable.

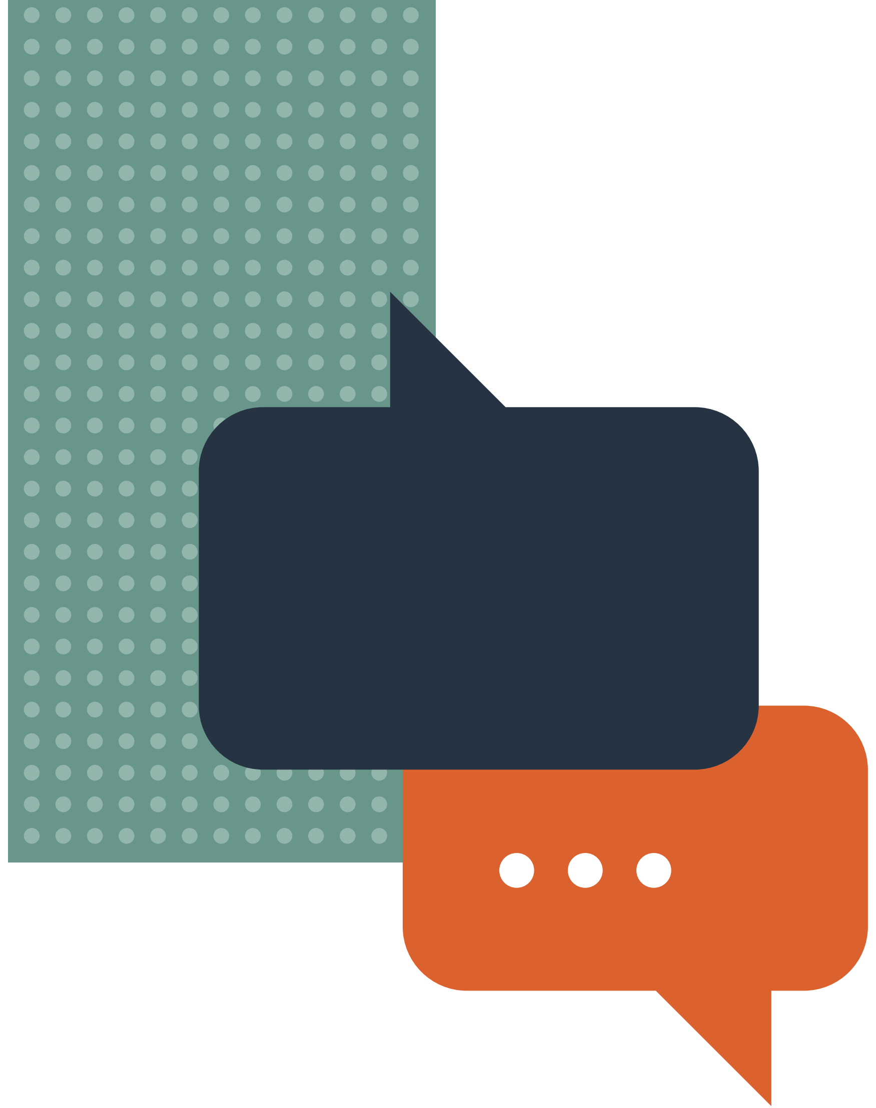
A powerful start to a meeting (focused on the decision for that meeting), a rich exchange of client-centric dialogue during the meeting and a purposeful close results in micro decisions that drive momentum.

10. Closing Conversations

Conversational Challenges We See

Many sellers we encounter suffer from ‘premature closing syndrome’. This can manifest as either a ‘trial’ close or an ‘assumptive’ close, or it is driven by an internal time pressure such as a quarterly or annual quota.

If you don’t know whether it is the right time for the next logical decision to be the closing conversation, you are guessing, and in the closing zone there is no place for guesswork.



Advice From...

Mark Stephenson
Sales Coach And Facilitator

Effective qualification naturally leads to successful closing conversations. Top sellers facilitate the inevitable negotiations about investment levels openly and collaboratively, maintaining a focus on win/win outcomes.

Recognising when the client is ready is crucial, and understanding their needs and confirming their readiness prevents premature closing. Strategic questions help gauge commitment and resolve any remaining doubts. Engaging the client in a collaborative dialogue about the final steps helps build trust and alignment. Approach these conversations as a partnership, ensuring both parties feel valued. Transparent discussions and negotiation lay the foundation for a successful close. Maintaining flexibility and adaptability during these conversations is key. Each client is different, and their path to a decision can vary. Top sellers stay attuned to these nuances, adjusting their approach as needed.

Ultimately, closing conversations are more than just ‘sealing the deal’. They reinforce a mutually beneficial ongoing relationship. By focusing on effective qualification, open communication, and adaptability, you can ensure that your closing conversations are successful.

Let’s have
a conversation

Are You Facing Any Of These Challenges?

The challenges of selling in a complex B2B landscape are well documented. If you are a sales leader, how do you support and equip your teams to establish trust, meaningfully differentiate and enable value-creating conversations with clients? How do you help them with:

- Gaining access to the right people
- Engaging and building trust with stakeholders
- Identifying client value
- Keeping momentum on opportunities
- Differentiating your organisation from competitors
- Enabling client decisions and realising client value
- Negotiating profitable win-win agreements
- Growing and sustaining accounts

We recognise that success in complex B2B sales comes down to a series of interactions and conversations which, when orchestrated well, enable the free flow of information between both parties, creating mutual value and driving revenue growth.

About Us

Rather than looking at upskilling your business development professionals as simply a programme or a training course, at The Sales Coach Network we see it as a compelling business strategy with a far-reaching impact on your culture, your business and your clients. Beyond just transactions, it's about the interactions, conversations and experiences that effective learning and development creates. That's why everything we do is aimed at embedding a meaningful culture and mindset throughout your organisation in order to deliver measurable and sustainable impact.

1

Practical Approach

Our team members are practitioners who can actively participate in your sales processes. They offer advice and training from a practical, real-world perspective, not just theoretical knowledge, ensuring credibility and effectiveness.

2

Experienced Coaches

Our expert coaches combine extensive industry experience with proven coaching techniques. They offer insights and strategies that are both innovative and practical, ensuring your team is well-prepared for real-world challenges.

3

Customised Solutions

We leverage the best research and thinking to co-create programmes with you, making them part of your sales culture. By incorporating best practices and adapting them to your specific environment, we drive the change you seek and you achieve better outcomes.

World-Class Methodology

Our unique value-based consultative sales methodology, The Sales Accelerator Method is a combination of principles, mindsets, skills and tools that are proven to create value for some of the largest and best known organisations in the world.

Complex sales involve multiple client engagements, often with several stakeholders, and there are only ever three outcomes from a sales meeting with a prospect or client. We either advance, go backwards, or don't move from our previous position.

There is only one thing that allows us to gain and keep momentum on any sale: when the client makes a decision to proceed further with us, based on the quality of our interactions and conversations. That's the essence of our methodology, which increases speed to value for our clients.

The Sales Accelerator Methodology comprises a proven set of frameworks, skills, techniques and tools designed to enable organisations to transition from product or service-based selling to value-based consultative selling. Unlike many consultative selling methods, the focus is not just on what to do, but HOW to do it.

It is principles-based, client-centric and structured around the different decisions your clients need to take as you progress a sale, and importantly the dialogue required to enable those decisions in every meeting.

[Read more about our models and frameworks.]

The Sales Accelerator Method

Complex, high-value sales only happen when:

- There are challenges to solve or business outcomes to achieve
- We jointly identify the value between where they are and where they want to be
- The change is worth the cost
- The future state is a better state
- Our solution precisely meets their needs – both intellectually and emotionally
- Prospects or clients see us as capable, credible and trustworthy
- We can articulate why we're different in a way that matters to the client

Systematic Approach

Like any sports team, the goal of a great sales team is to win against their competitors. Success is not dependent upon a single sales leader or 'superstar' salesperson, but is built into the systems meaning the team wins again and again, year after year. Great leaders institutionalise sales success by building enduring structures and systems that align with their goals and strategy.

In our work with clients to enhance sales performance and grow their revenue, we are actively engaged in designing and developing enduring sales training and coaching programmes that become adopted as 'business as usual'. These assignments are dedicated change programmes focused on sales and business development where training and coaching are only part of the solution.

Training And Coaching Require Underpinning

If behaviour changes and the adoption of new mindsets, skills, frameworks and tools are to be sustainable, you need to look more holistically at methodology, process, enablement, management and leadership. If all of the required elements for sales success are not linked, your organisation will not optimise the critical client conversations that lead to revenue growth. Imagine an old engine that is 'out of tune' – the elements required for success are not functioning like a well-oiled machine. Lack of alignment will result in wasted time and effort, inefficiency and narrow conversations that will inhibit growth. Conversely, if all of the elements are linked up, your organisation will have more meaningful client conversations that drive growth.

All sales organisations are perfectly aligned to achieve the results they get. Sales leaders may establish goals, yet have systems that are completely misaligned with those goals. For example, they may say they want cooperation, but often their compensation model fosters destructive competition within teams or departments. They say they want high trust, but their bureaucratic approval systems communicate mistrust at all levels. Many sales leaders complain that they can't do much about the systems they've inherited or the territory their team manages. We disagree! You have a great deal of control over how you develop and position the people on your team. You also have direct impact on the structure, systems and processes that you and your team use to get the work done. Creating systems of success is the responsibility of sales leaders at any level.

Great People

The Sales Coach Network is a collection of experienced professionals, operating independently and collaboratively, unified by a common framework and approach. We all share three qualities:

Pragmatic

We know the importance of starting with the facts about your current situation, rather than guessing. We handle all assignments sensibly and realistically, based on practical rather than theoretical considerations. We focus on change, with careful consideration of results and consequences.

Professional

We view sales as a profession and we are dedicated to consistently upholding high standards. Everyone on the team has a specialism, based on 'on the job' experience as individual contributors, sales leaders or leaders of leaders.

Personable

We are easy to communicate with. We value our clients for who they are as we coach them to be the best version of themselves. We ask questions, encourage and elaborate, in a way that is both friendly and challenging.

Choosing The Right Partner

It is critical that you engage the right partner to drive sustainable revenue growth, particularly if there is a desire to transition towards a more centralised approach over time. We have highlighted the main differences between typical training providers and The Sales Coach Network below.

Traditional Training Providers

1. Focus on training
2. Limited to training and coaching
3. Broad range of offerings, often dominated by leadership offerings
4. Sales performance usually a small part of a broad portfolio
5. Limited cyclical investment in new content
6. Standard offerings and inflexible tools
7. Training provider branding
8. Standard content delivered by trainers
9. Often significant IP and licensing charges
10. Typically work in isolation to Sales Enablement functions
11. Focus on Learning and Development
12. Enable learning through interventions and events

The Sales Coach Network

1. Focus on business outcomes and embedding
2. Training and coaching are only part of a broader capability
3. Broad range of sales performance offerings (includes sales leadership)
4. We specialise on sales performance improvement
5. Ongoing development with monthly enhancements to content
6. Bespoke programmes and tools based on detailed needs analysis
7. Custom programmes in your branding
8. Delivered by practitioners that can bring a real-world view
9. No separate IP charges
10. Complement and supplement Sales Enablement functions
11. Focus on the entire sales ecosystem
12. Enable transformation through multi-year programmes

Clients

More than 70 organisations have benefitted from our proven principles and methods over the past 10 years. Here's a select few.

Testimonials

"The opportunity cost of not doing it is higher than doing it, so I would highly recommend to everyone."

– Lisa Jefferies
Vice President of Client and Partner Services

"Whether you're an individual contributor, whether you're running a sales team, my advice would be jump right in."

– Douglas Gee
SVP, Head of Business Development

"We really are qualifying our opportunities now. We're not just chasing any old bit of business."

– Sharon Taylor
Head of Sales Operations

"This is my best year by far - I've achieved double my sales target, and I've also achieved next year's sales target already."

– Katharine Morris
Sales Manager

"I can't understand why you wouldn't do this. I regard selling as a profession. With all other vocations you'd be required to continually educate yourself."

– Karl Boehm
Strategic Account Executive

Watch our testimonial videos.

Let’s have a conversation

To arrange a call to discuss your needs and decide whether or not we might be a good fit, send us a short message and we’ll have a quick conversation with no obligation.

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