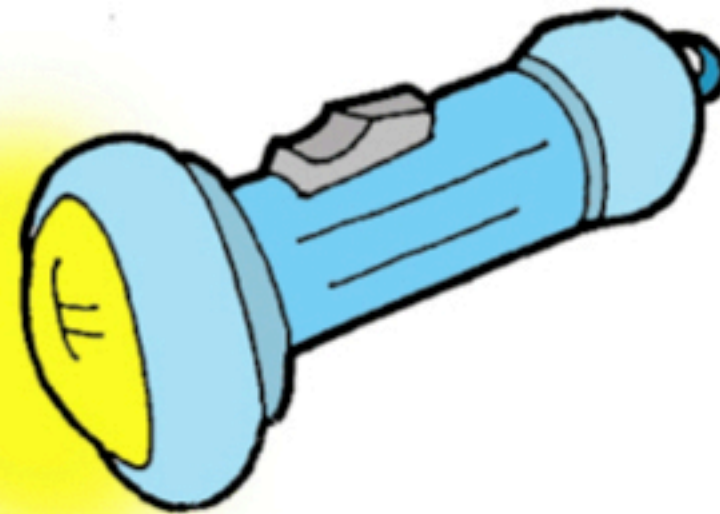


12



## Key Initiatives

that could help to  
accelerate your revenue growth

**INFLEXION•POINT**  
ACCELERATING REVENUE GROWTH

## 12 Key Initiatives

1. Identifying your ideal customers and prospects
2. Understanding your key stakeholders' concerns and motivations
3. Capturing the key trends and issues affecting your prospects
4. Identifying your prospects' key trigger events
5. Actively participating in business social media
6. Establishing a consensus about "sales ready leads"
7. Applying consistent sales opportunity qualification
8. Implementing a structured and repeatable sales process
9. Adopting dynamic sales pipeline management
10. Applying consistent standards for sales forecasting
11. Continuous reinforcement of sales training
12. Maximising CRM user enthusiasm and adoption

What are the factors that separate many of today's top-performing B2B sales and marketing organisations from the rest? Having outstanding products and services that are truly relevant to a well-defined target audience is clearly important.

But when you look at the factors that truly separate the fastest growing vendors from the rest, it's often their ability to execute that really impresses. They have the ability to align their entire sales and marketing organisation around a common set of winning strategies and tactics.

Our own research - together with a body of work by the Harvard Business Review, the Aberdeen Group, Sirius Decisions, CSO Insights and others - has thrown up a dozen key initiatives that seem to be particularly effective - when they are applied in an integrated fashion - in establishing a repeatable, scalable and high performing sales and marketing machine.

You'll see these initiatives identified on the left. The remainder of this guide introduces each of the initiatives one-by-one, explains why they are important, and suggests a simple action plan that could help you to implement them within your organisation.

Each initiative by itself has the potential to have an important impact on an important aspect of your sales and marketing performance. But they have a powerful multiplier effect when they are combined together.

I encourage you to review each of these initiatives and to assess how they might be applied to your own organisation. You might find it helpful to complete our online [B2B Sales and Marketing Health Check](#) - it could help you to focus on the areas that could most benefit from attention.

If, after reviewing this document, you are interested in learning more about how we might help your organisation put these initiatives into action, please give me a call on **+44 (0)118 975 0595** or email me at [bob.apollo@inflexion-point.com](mailto:bob.apollo@inflexion-point.com) and let's find the time for a quick exploratory conversation.



Bob Apollo  
[Inflexion-Point Strategy Partners Limited](#)



# Identifying your ideal customers and prospects

## Why this Initiative is Important

Identifying your ideal prospects and customers is no longer just about company size, sector or location. Most B2B organisations are finding that these traditional demographic-based approaches to segmentation are an increasingly inadequate and incomplete means of describing the most important and relevant characteristics of their **most valuable customers and prospects**.

Today's top-performing B2B sales and marketing organisations have recognised that other factors have become far more important in segmenting today's complex markets - and are focusing on the organisational, environmental and behavioural characteristics that serve to distinguish their most valuable and important customers and prospects.

In fact, these latter factors are usually far more relevant than demographics in helping sales and marketing organisations to target and qualify more of the right sort of prospects. But information about these factors typically can't be bought from traditional list brokers. This is a powerful incentive for vendors to do their own research, and to build, nurture and enhance target prospect lists that capture the key characteristics of their most valuable new business opportunities.

B2B Sales and Marketing organisations that have implemented ideal customer profiles enjoy a number of significant advantages - they report more effective inbound and outbound marketing campaigns and more effective sales qualification leading to larger sales pipelines, shorter average sales cycles and improved sales win rates.

## Action Plan

Start by getting key members of your sales and marketing teams together and brainstorming the common characteristics of your ideal customers for one of your key product or service offerings in a key target market. You can [learn more about ideal customer profiles](#) here and [download a blank ideal customer worksheet here](#).

Once you've got used to the process, we suggest that you repeat it for your other product or service offerings and their key target markets. Use the information to help prioritise and target your marketing messages and campaigns and to develop sales qualification guidelines (**see key initiative #7**)

# 2.

## Understanding your key stakeholders' concerns and motivations

### Why this Initiative is Important

B2C marketing organisations have used the idea of "**buyer personas**" with great success for several years. More recently a growing number of today's most successful B2B sales & marketing organisations have come to acknowledge the power of this approach - also known as "Key Stakeholder Profiles".

These buyer personas - or, in the case of B2B marketing, **stakeholder profiles** - seek to establish archetypes for the key roles that are usually most important in the B2B buying decision process and to synthesise their likely issues, concerns and motivations - as well as understanding where the typical stakeholder is likely to turn when they are seeking advice or information.

When developing your key stakeholder profiles, you'll want to identify the key roles that are typically most influential in your prospect's decision-making processes. These might, for example, include the key operational, financial and technical stakeholders. For each of these roles, you'll want to think about their typical titles, roles and responsibilities, as well as the part they typically play in the decision process.

Beyond, this, you'll want to anticipate their likely priorities, goals, concerns, motivations, constraints and frustrations - as well as their typical personal success measures, the trends and issues that are likely to affect them, and the people, sources and organisations that are likely to influence their thinking.

Organisations that have mastered the concept of stakeholder profiles report that they find it easier to create messages, materials and sales tools that resonate strongly with their target audience and which serve to more effectively facilitate the buying decision process.

### Action Plan

Key stakeholder profiles can be thought of as the role-based equivalents of ideal customer profiles, with the former applying at the personal level and the latter at the organisational level. You can [find out more here](#) and [download a template here](#).

We recommend that you work with the same group that you assembled to create your ideal customer profiles (**see key initiative #1**) and that once you've come up with your first draft profiles that you test them by conducting a series of voice of the customer conversations with representative examples drawn from your customer and prospect base.

# 3.

## Capturing the key issues and trends affecting your prospects

### Why this Initiative is Important

Vendors that are able to deeply understand and anticipate the **issues** and **trends** facing their target audience - at both an organisational and a personal level - are much better equipped to present their offerings as solutions to problems that are important to their potential buyers.

Issues are the things that are happening within the target audience's organisation - these can include the consequences of key corporate initiatives or recent changes within the organisation. You'll want to look for the factors that are likely to cause your prospects to start searching for answers to their most pressing business challenges.

Trends are the factors that are external to the organisation (often at a market level, including things like legislation and regulation, structural changes in the market, key technology trends and/or Merger & Acquisition activity) and which are likely to have an impact on your target audience's decision making.

You'll want to understand how they describe the problem - also how they would categorise the sort of solutions they are looking for. But beyond this, it's also important to try and anticipate where are they likely to look, what words they might use in their search, and whom they are likely to trust to give them sound advice.

Organisations that have invested in identifying with the most significant issues and trends that affect their target audience and apply them to create issue-based campaigns report that they are generating significantly higher quality enquiries and leads from their ideal customers and prospects.

### Action Plan

You can [learn more about issues and trends here](#). We recommend that you leverage win-loss reports and voice of the customer interviews to build up a picture of the issues and trends that are most important to your target audience - and which you can credibly claim to solve better than the other options open to them.

Sift through the intelligence you collect to identify **issues** and **trends** that you can base key sales and marketing messages and campaigns around. Prioritise the ones that (1) appear to be most relevant to your prospects, (2) enable you to establish a positive and distinctive point of view and (3) where you can suggest a clear, attractive and interesting "next step" to your target audience.

# 4.

## Identifying your prospects' key trigger events

### Why this Initiative is Important

Issues and trends help to define the general background to your prospect's B2B buying decisions. **Trigger events** are specific disturbances to the status quo that cause your potential customers to recognise that they have a problem that needs solving and to start searching for a suitable solution.

Trigger events are particularly important in influencing the timing of the buying decision process. Common examples might include significant changes in executive management or in the financial or operational performance of the department or the organisation.

Other trigger events might include external factors or news items that raise the visibility of a pre-existing issue or problem and that focus executive attention on the need to take action. The common factor is a recognition that the organisation may need to change some aspect of its behaviour in response to the new stimulus.

Studies have shown that vendors that are able to make connection with a prospect immediately after a trigger event has occurred (or have already become known to them prior to the event) have at least a **5 times greater** chance of winning the deal than an organisation that only stumbles on the opportunity long after the trigger event has passed and the prospect has already started to develop a clear picture of what they are looking for - and/or a competitor has influenced their agenda.

We call this critical period between your prospect recognising an issue and starting to formulate a plan for dealing with it the "**window of discontent**", and your ability to take advantage of it is significantly enhanced by your ability to **implement the previous three initiatives**.

### Action Plan

You can [learn more about trigger events here](#), and you can lay the foundation for dealing with them by first identifying your ideal prospects and key stakeholders and by identifying with the key issues and trends that affect them. Use win-loss analysis and voice of the customer conversations to identify the typical trigger events that caused recent new customers to start searching for a solution.

Take the trigger events that seem to be most significant and work out how you can best identify that a potential prospect might be going through one of the defined trigger events. Use LinkedIn and other internet searches - and your inbound and outbound prospecting activities - to systematically uncover these triggers. Put mechanisms in place to ensure you follow them up in a timely fashion.

# 5.

## Actively participating in business social media

### Why this Initiative is Important

If you think that social media is only relevant to Business-to-Consumer markets, it's time to think again. Recent research by Global Web Index shows that **senior B2B decision makers** are more socially engaged than the average internet user, and far more likely to use the web to do research for work, to research products and services, and to research how to do things and solve problems than they are to use it to stay in touch with friends.

This is a fast-evolving phenomenon. The past two years have seen dramatic increases in senior B2B decision makers' adoption of social media profiles (such as **LinkedIn**), microblogging services (such as **Twitter**) and educational business videos. A growing number have created either their own blog or contributed to their company blog. The trend is surely set to continue - maybe even to increase momentum.

In fact, according to Brett Petersen, Senior Strategy Consultant at **Global Web Index** "*Social media has become an essential tool for business to business marketers and in some markets participation in these platforms could be the difference between getting your foot in the door and making the sale. Our research highlights the need for B2B marketers to have a sophisticated strategy for leveraging the right platforms, empowering their staff to participate and making contact with client decision makers*".

Add to this the fact the internet-savvy B2B buyers are choosing to involve vendors far later than they used to in the buying decision process, and we have the recipe for a perfect storm.

B2B-focused organisations that fail to grasp this dramatic transformation in B2B buying behaviour will inevitably fall behind their more agile and B2B social-adept competitors. Many already have - perhaps without yet recognising it. This is not to suggest - as some "social media charlatans" have done - that traditional marketing has been rendered obsolete overnight. Organisations still need to master both **inbound** and the more traditional **outbound marketing**. But the balance has irreversibly shifted.

### Action Plan

Make sure that your organisation - and your spokespeople - have an [active presence on business social media](#), and in particular on **LinkedIn** and **Twitter**. Establish an active company blog, and ensure that you update it on at least a weekly basis. Use business social media to make connections and to educate and share valuable ideas with your audience. Avoid the hard sell. Focus on issues and trends that are important to your audience. Avoid overt product promotion. And please don't be boring.

# 6.

## Establishing a consensus about “sales ready” leads

### Why this Initiative is Important

It's a familiar scene in many B2B organisations: Marketing is complaining that, despite all their efforts, the sales force simply isn't serious about following up on the leads they have generated. At the same time, sales is frustrated because marketing never seems to generate enough attractive opportunities. The story is repeated in sales and marketing departments around the world.

Sometimes the issue is structural - the marketing and sales departments simply aren't organised or resourced to be able to qualify and nurture incoming leads until they are ready. But very often, the root of the problem - and the failure to fix it - lies in the fact that there is no commonly agreed and documented definition of what a “sales ready lead” looks like.

Top performing B2B sales and marketing organisations tend to have very clear definitions about the minimum criteria that must be established before a marketing-generated lead can be described as “sales ready”. These criteria often reflect important aspects of the already-agreed **ideal customer profiles** and **key issues** as well as other factors that can help answer at least some of the following questions:

1. Does the prospect have a real need?
2. Is the prospect likely to buy anything?
3. Are we in a good position to win their business?
4. Will winning this deal represent the best use of our resources?

Informal agreements between sales and marketing aren't good enough: there needs to be a written and mutually agreed definition of what a “sales ready” lead looks like. But equally important, sales needs to commit to marketing that they will follow up any such leads and provide timely feedback as to the outcome.

### Action Plan

Get your sales and marketing teams together, and ask them to thrash out a commonly acceptable definition of what a “sales ready” lead looks like. Make sure that it is clearly documented, and consistent with the already-established definition of an “ideal customer”.

Ask them to establish a simple written contract that establishes what the sales organisation will do to follow up every qualifying lead - and how they will report back to marketing.



# 7.

## Applying consistent sales opportunity qualification

### Why this Initiative is Important

One of the key behaviours that distinguish top-performing sales people is their ability to accurately **qualify sales opportunities** from a very early stage in the sales process, and to focus their attention on those prospects where they have the strongest chance of winning. It's worth contrasting their behaviour with less effective sales people, who often invest far too much time on opportunities that are **never destined to close**.

But qualification skills can be learned, and must be managed. The benefits are clear: organisations that impose consistent opportunity qualification criteria have shorter average sales cycles and higher average sales win rates - and make much better use of scarce pre-sales resources.

Effective sales qualification builds upon the four questions we introduced in the "sales ready lead" initiative.

1. Does the prospect have a real need?
2. Is the prospect likely to buy anything?
3. Are we in a good position to win their business?
4. Will winning this deal represent the best use of our resources?

We recommend that you start by comparing each incoming lead against a clearly defined ideal customer profile (**key initiative #1**), and that you develop a systematic qualification checklist based the common characteristics of winning deals. Managers should expect sales people to justify the inclusion of every new opportunity in the **sales pipeline** based on tangible, observable evidence and not on hope or supposition.

### Action Plan

Carefully review your sales wins and losses over the past 12 months, including the ones that ended in "no decision". Look for the patterns that distinguish the winning deals from the rest - look at customer characteristics, the nature of the issue they were trying to solve, and other factors that appear to affect your chances of winning. Ask your leading sales people to characterise what they look for when qualifying new sales opportunities.

Capture the results in a concise sales qualification matrix. Circulate it widely, and make it clear that you expect all sales people to use it. Better still, embed it into your CRM system.

# 8.

## Implementing a structured and repeatable sales process

### Why this Initiative is Important

According to research conducted by **CSO Insights**, top-performing sales organisations are likely to have established a clearly defined, well-structured, repeatable, scalable and provably effective sales process - and have implemented it consistently across their entire sales organisation.

That's not to say that these processes are so rigid as to stifle innovation or creativity - far from it. The opposite tends to be true: successful sales processes evolve in a dynamic fashion - they continuously absorb the latest emerging best practices from both the organisation's top sales performers and from the industry at large.

Without a well-defined, structured, repeatable sales process, organisations struggle to elevate the performance of their average sales people and - equally important - tend to have issues making new hires (and new partners) productive quickly.

It's also hard to implement effective CRM systems unless they can incorporate a systematic sales process that clearly establishes the key stages in the buying decision process or the key milestones that make it possible to measure progress based on evidence rather than activity.

Establishing a structured and repeatable sales process has other advantages. It allows marketing to create tools and collateral that are thoughtfully targeted at moving the prospect from one stage to the next in their buying decision process - rather than the all-too-common generic pieces that have no obvious useful role to play.

### Action Plan

Start by looking at the behaviour of your most effective sales people. What do they do at each stage in the sales process? What do they identify as the key "moments of truth" in a winning sales campaign? What corporate-developed sales tools or marketing collateral do they use? Which ones do they ignore? What additional tools or resources have they personally created to support their sales activities?

Then test your model using formal win-loss analyses and (this is often most important) through carefully structured "voice of the customer" interviews with recent past prospects. Collate all the learning to establish a defined sales process that incorporates all the observed key best practices. Make sure that you continue to adapt it in the light of new learning and changing circumstances.

# 9.

## Adopting dynamic sales pipeline management

### Why this Initiative is Important

In their recent report on "The Case for Dynamic Pipeline Management", CSO Insights - the globally respected sales effectiveness research organisation - make a compelling case for adopting a proactive approach to managing sales pipelines. They point out that pipeline management has evolved through a number of phases.

They refer to the first era as "**measure and punish**", in which sales reps would promise a number they had no ability to validate and their managers had no ability to track. The rise of SFA and CRM systems ushered in the era of "**stare and compare**", which relied on the sales manager's memory or ability to cross-refer between spreadsheets to track changes in the pipeline. In both eras, by the time a change was recognised it was usually **too late to take corrective action**.

CSO Insights point out that the rise of specialised sales analytics is now offering sales leaders the chance to identify changes as they occur, in close-to-real time, rather than after the event - while there is still time to react to ensure that deals stay on track and close as promised. They refer to this new era of proactive, evidence-based pipeline management as "**detect and correct**".

They recommend - as we do - that before sales people can move a deal from one stage in the next in the CRM system, they are required to confirm that they have observed the necessary evidence of buyer behaviour and commitment, and have implemented the prescribed sales tactics. CSO Insights quote a number of impressive benefits from **proactive sales pipeline management**. We've certainly seen dramatic improvements in terms of shortening sales cycles and increasing sales win rates.

Proactive sales pipeline management depends upon a foundation of both accurate data and timely reporting tools. **CRM systems** must be configured to track overall both sales velocity and time-in-stage for every deal in the pipeline. Changes to the status of individual deals must be immediately visible to managers. Managers must be equipped to **manage by exception**.

### Action Plan

Start by clearly defining and documenting the key stages and milestones in your sales pipeline. Make sure that your defined sales stages align with the key phases in your prospects buying decision process. Pay particular attention to carefully defining the key milestones that separate one stage from the next. Ensure that your CRM system is configured to track time-in-stage for every deal. And then insist that every sales person implements these guidelines consistently.

# 10.

## Applying consistent sales forecasting standards

### Why this Initiative is Important

CSO Insights have been tracking **sales forecast accuracy** for many years. Their latest 2011 Sales Performance Optimisation study - which collated the experiences of more than 2,000 B2B sales organisations - found that **fewer than half** of forecasted deals were closing as predicted.

Average sales forecast accuracy is now **less reliable than flipping a coin** and hoping to get the right answer. There's little sign of improvement. The impact on both the top and bottom lines is striking - and will be career-changing for some. Executives, boards and investors simply cannot afford the uncertain performance that is associated with poor sales forecast accuracy.

It's a big problem for many companies. It's not helped by the growing number of sales opportunities that end in a decision to "**do nothing**" - a decision which might have been predictable far earlier with better sales qualification. And deals that were inexplicably delayed might have moved forward more quickly if the sales person concerned had been better at creating urgency.

Inevitably, best-in-class organisations do better. CSO Insights found that companies with well-defined dynamic sales processes out-performed their peers by **25%** or more. The quality of sales pipeline management is another key factor. Managers who insist on evidence of buyer commitment when positioning prospects in pipelines do far better than those who rely on sales activity alone.

Perhaps most important, your forecasting decisions must be based on a combination of fact and judgement: what **stage** has the prospect actually achieved in their buying process - and your **chances of winning** in the current sales period using explicit "commit", "upside" and "best case" categories rather than percentages. In both aspects, the answers must be backed by evidence and not intuition.

### Action Plan

Review your current sales forecasting guidelines - and if you haven't documented any, do so as a matter of urgency. Make sure that they incorporate both fact and judgement. If you've been persuaded by your CRM vendor to use their out-of-the box forecasting percentages, stop the process now.

If you insist on using percentages in the forecasting process, make sure they accurately reflect the historic conversion rates of similar deals. But perhaps most important, recognise that at a deal by deal level, you either win or you don't - and focus on the winnable deals.



# Continuous reinforcement of sales training

## Why this Initiative is Important

“Solution selling” - whether you choose to employ **SPIN Selling**, **TAS (Target Account Selling)**, **Miller-Heimann**, **SPI’s Solution Selling™** or any of the other recognised methodologies - cannot be mastered simply by sending people on a training course. Adopting solution selling involves a cultural change that has to pervade every aspect of your sales and marketing activities - or the initiative will surely fail.

The training companies admit as much. Their own studies have shown that without regular reinforcement, **80-90%** of everything that has been taught will have been **forgotten** or **abandoned** within **2-4 weeks**. Moving to e-learning based systems can help to maintain the message, but even that is an incomplete answer. It’s clear that training by itself isn’t the complete answer.

It should be obvious that you can’t offer a “solution” without first understanding the problem. So, to become organisationally successful at solution selling - and for your investment in sales training to pay off - your sales people have to become experts in **identifying and solving problems** that your prospects and customers care deeply about, and which you can help them address more effectively than any other option open to them.

This - in turn - requires that you train and equip your sales people to have truly consultative conversations about the issues that are most relevant to your potential customers. [You can learn more about improving the quality of sales conversations here.](#)

From our perspective, all of the sales training methodologies we’ve mentioned - and there are many others - are generally pretty effective. Some have particular strengths in certain sales environments. But the thing that really makes the difference is not which methodology you choose - it lies in the strength of your commitment to ensure that your chosen methodology becomes deeply embedded into your **day-to-day sales and marketing activities**.

## Action Plan

If you’ve invested in sales training, make sure that you are reinforcing your chosen methodology in your CRM and sales reporting systems. Make sure - whatever approach you’ve chosen - that you’ve prepared the groundwork before signing up for any new training.

Then make sure that you reinforce everything that your sales people have been taught using carefully tailored sales tools that fully reflect and reinforce your chosen methodology.

# 12.

## Maximising CRM user enthusiasm and adoption

### Why this Initiative is Important

CRM has become a "must have" for most B2B sales organisations, and yet few CRM systems deliver the hoped for results. Fewer still truly achieve their potential. The problem is particularly prominent with "out of the box" implementations in which the vendors default systems are accepted without thoughtful analysis.

All too often, we see **pipeline stages** that are related to sales activity rather than the progression of the buying process, **forecasts** based on hope rather than evidence, **probability percentages** that bear no relationship to reality, and sales people who use the system only because they have to rather than because they want to.

Our first recommendation is that you configure your CRM system so that the pipeline stages relate to key phases in your prospect's buying decision process, and that the promotion of a deal from one stage to the next must be associated with evidence of buyer activity rather than sales activity.

Closely associated with this, we have rarely come across a sales environment where the true probability of a deal closing from any particular stage bore any reality to the arbitrary percentages set as default in the CRM system. If you are going to associate percentages with sales stages (and there are some very good reasons why you should not - *ask us why*) then you must at least ensure that they match the realities of your own sales environment.

But the most important challenge is clear - **user adoption**. The primary user - the sales person - needs to believe that using the system will help them qualify better, sell more effectively, and earn more commission. They need to feel that they are getting out more than they are putting in. Your CRM system needs to pass their "WIIFM" test - "**What's In It For Me?**"

### Action Plan

Start by making sure that your CRM system fully reflects your defined sales process and sales pipeline stages. Take a careful look at what you expect your sales people to report on, and what value they get from the system in return. Make sure that your CRM implementation passes the "WIIFM" test.

But you also need to ensure that you are using - and seen to be using - the information generated by your CRM system in a constructive and productive way. Otherwise, it's just going to be a case of "garbage in - garbage out".

# INFLEXION•POINT

## ACCELERATING REVENUE GROWTH

Based in Reading, UK, Inflexion-Point Strategy Partners work with ambitious CEOs of high-growth-potential companies, equipping them to realise their strategic vision through **more effective sales and marketing execution**.

Our clients are typically technology-based enterprises with a **B2B focus**, a complex value proposition and a lengthy sales cycle involving multiple stakeholders. Many are trying to evolve from a technology-led to a **solution-driven** approach.

Our customers are typically already doing quite well - but are convinced that they have the potential to do **even better**. Our thoughtful approach is enabling them to systematically **accelerate their revenue growth**.

We may be able to help you achieve the same.

## Conclusions - and Next Steps

We hope that some of the ideas in this guide have resonated with what you are trying to achieve in your sales and marketing organisation, and that you will be motivated to put them into practice. Even if you've already got all of these initiatives covered to your satisfaction, we hope that this document has helped to validate the feeling that you're on the right track.

As we pointed out in the introduction, each of the 12 initiatives has by itself the potential to have a significant impact on an important aspect of your sales and marketing performance. But they have a powerful multiplier effect when they are combined together.

If you're interested in learning more, we suggest you start by going online and completing our [B2B Sales and Marketing Health Check](#). It should take no more than 10-15 minutes and will help you assess your current performance in each of these areas and start to establish some priorities for action.

We suggest that you encourage other members of your management team to do the same - each taking the test independently and then getting together to compare your results. The resulting conversations are often very stimulating!

If you are interested in learning more about how we might help your organisation put these initiatives into action, please visit our website at [www.inflexion-point.com](http://www.inflexion-point.com), give me a call on **+44 (0)118 975 0595** or email me at [bob.apollo@inflexion-point.com](mailto:bob.apollo@inflexion-point.com) and let's have a quick exploratory conversation.



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