



Mastering the Marathon

Strategies for managing long sales cycles

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Have you ever run a marathon? Most people have not. But many salespeople run them every day — the long sales cycle. Salespeople love the quick win — that satisfying moment when a prospect becomes a customer in a matter of days or weeks. Sometimes, it is even the fabled “one-call close.” But what about those times where the sales cycle stretches into months or even years? How do you keep your sales teams motivated, strategic, on-task and successful when the finish line seems so far away?

Long sales cycles present unique challenges. They test a salesperson’s patience, strategic thinking and ability to maintain momentum over extended periods. They can also tempt even the most disciplined sales professionals to neglect certain prospecting when a closed deal feels far out of reach. But here is the truth: mastering the long sales cycle is not just a skill, it is an art form. And like any art, it requires dedication, practice and a specific set of techniques. Let’s explore four key strategies that can help you and your team excel in the marathon of long-cycle sales.

Never Stop Prospecting

Imagine you are a farmer (no, not the old, outdated “hunter/farmer” sales term). You know it takes months for your crops to grow, but you also know that if you do not plant seeds regularly, you will eventually have nothing to harvest. The same principle applies to long-cycle sales.

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking: “Why start new conversations when I won’t close them for years?” But remember this: you cannot finish a sale unless you start one. Prospecting is the lifeblood of your sales pipeline, regardless of how long it takes to close a deal. A sales funnel that does not consistently fill at the top will run dry at the bottom.

Make prospecting a nonnegotiable part of your weekly routine. Set dedicated time each day to reach out to new potential clients. Use a mix of cold calls, emails, social media outreach and networking events to keep your pipeline full. Remember, the seeds you plant today are the deals you will close tomorrow — or next year. The best prospecting cadence is to open with a phone call (yes, a genuine, pick-up-the-phone, voice-to-voice call) to attempt to reach your target. If you do not get an answer (80% to 90% of the time these days), then leave a powerful voicemail message and switch to a LinkedIn connection. Once connected, slow play the connection using engagement techniques, then ask for the appointment two to three months after connecting.



Think Strategically, Act Consistently

Once you have initiated a conversation with a prospect, it is time to shift into strategic mode. This is where the real art of long-cycle selling comes into play.

Start by estimating a realistic timeline for the deal. Is it six months? A year? Two years? This timeline becomes your road map, guiding your interactions and helping you set milestones along the way.

With each contact, your goal should be to move the buyer’s journey forward, even if it is just by inches. This is particularly crucial when you are up against an incumbent vendor with an existing contract. You are playing the long game, so every interaction should add value and strengthen your position. Basically, you are positioning yourself to be the vendor of choice at contract time.

Maybe it is sharing a relevant industry report, offering a fresh perspective on a challenge he (or she) is facing or simply checking in to maintain the relationship — but offering some new piece of knowledge or expertise every time. The key is consistency. Regular, value-added touchpoints keep you top of mind and position you as a trusted advisor, not just another vendor.

Keep Your Contacts Current

In the span of a long sales cycle, a lot can change. Decision-makers move on, new stakeholders emerge and organizational priorities shift. Your job is to stay on top of these changes and adapt your strategy accordingly.

Make it a habit to regularly verify and update your contact information. But do not stop there — strive to expand your network within the organization. The more contacts you have, the more resilient your opportunity becomes to personnel changes. “High, wide and deep” should be your watchwords.

Get as high on the corporate food chain as you can. Get as many contacts (a wide base of influence) in the target company as you can. And make sure that each person genuinely knows you and the value you bring. This approach not only provides you with a more comprehensive understanding of the organization, but also helps safeguard your opportunity if your main contact leaves.

Be Ready When the Stars Align

Here is a fundamental truth about sales: a deal happens when need, solution and timing intersect, and the buyer's journey completes. In a long sales cycle, your job is to be ready when that moment arrives.

Maybe the incumbent vendor slips up, budget suddenly becomes available or a new initiative aligns perfectly with your offering. Your consistent presence and value-added interactions have positioned you to capitalize on these moments.

Stay alert to industry trends, organizational changes and any shifts in your prospect's business that might create an opening. When that window of opportunity opens, be ready to act swiftly and decisively.

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Final Thoughts

Managing a long sales cycle is not about passive waiting — it is about active preparation. It is about building relationships, demonstrating value and positioning yourself as the obvious choice when the time is right. There are no shortcuts to any place worth going.

Winning in long-cycle sales requires a unique blend of patience, persistence and strategic thinking. It demands that we resist becoming demoralized due to the lack of quick wins and, instead, focus on building lasting relationships and delivering consistent value. By maintaining a steady prospecting rhythm, thinking strategically, keeping our contacts current and staying ready for opportunity, we can master the marathon of the long sales cycle. ■

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