

**Q&A with Michael J. Webb, Author of  
*Sales and Marketing the Six Sigma Way*  
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**Q: What's new about your book, *Sales and Marketing the Six Sigma Way*?**

This is the first book that shows marketing, sales, and general managers how to use Six Sigma and other process improvement methods to boost marketing and sales results.

**Q: What is Six Sigma?**

Six Sigma means different things to different people, but it always indicates the use of process improvement methods in management. The differences hinge on the degree of rigor and formality used in applying the methods. But the methods always include gathering data and facts, measuring activities and results, analyzing business processes for cause and effect, and experimenting to find the best solutions.

**Q: This is a new idea?**

It's new in marketing and sales. Process approaches and the quality movement go back for decades, to TQM [Total Quality Management] in the 1980s and beyond. Six Sigma began in the 1990s at Motorola and was used with tremendous success at Allied Signal and at GE under Jack Welch. Now it has moved into marketing and sales.

**Q: Why are companies applying these methods in marketing and sales?**

Two reasons: First, senior executives have seen that process improvement has worked well in operations, so it only makes sense to try it in marketing and sales. Second, managers are learning that the usual fixes for marketing and sales problems—firing the sales manager, holding a sales contest, or rejiggering the incentive plan—don't address problems in the sales process itself.

**Q: What do you mean by “the sales process”?**

The sales process is everything a company does to find, win and keep customers. It's the end-to-end chain of activities that facilitate the customer's buying process. The sales process and the buying process are two sides of the same coin. A company's sales process has to be designed and managed so that every activity in it produces the desired result for customers in the buying process.

**Q: And that's not happening now?**

Not consistently, and not in most companies.

**Q: Why not?**

Most marketing and sales managers don't view sales as a process for producing customers, which is really what it is. As a result, instead of managing sales as a process, they put their faith in the creativity of ad agencies, the numbers game of direct marketing, and the "star system" in which a few super salespeople produce most of the revenue.

**Q: What exactly does "managing sales as a process" mean?**

Here's an example from my book. A division of Hong Kong Shanghai Bank was about to add more salespeople to increase its sales. But first they had their quality expert map their sales process. He found that the problem wasn't too few salespeople; it was a bottleneck in the account-opening procedure. When they fixed that, sales skyrocketed.

**Q: How did he find that bottleneck?**

When you map and measure the activities in your sales process, stuff like that pops out all the time. He diagramed the activities in their sales process and saw that many prospects dropped out at the account-opening stage. The procedures were cumbersome and frustrated customers were going elsewhere. Fixing that fixed the sales problem—at a tiny fraction of the cost of adding more salespeople.

**Q: That's impressive. Do you have other examples?**

Tons. Field marketing tests at Motorola showed that using fewer, cheaper methods of promoting cell phones worked better than using more, and more expensive, methods. A lumber company increased the performance of its entire salesforce by getting everyone to achieve the *average* level of regional performance, which sounds counterintuitive but worked beautifully. A Web-based company mapped its online sales process and made simple changes to the copy on two pages which boosted sales by 12 percent overnight.

**Q: What's the theme that runs through these cases and through your book?**

You've got to understand your sales process and your customer's buying process. Then you have to adjust your sales process to give customers what they need at each point in their buying process. You define activities sharply, measure the heck out of everything, discover cause-and-effect relationships between what you do in marketing and sales and what your customers do in response—and you keep adjusting, measuring, and improving.

Sales and marketing the Six Sigma way is basically ensuring that you have a sales process that gives customers what they need in order to buy what you sell.