

SELECTION

Close Date	Opportunity	Owner	Stage	Days in Stage	Total Value	Per
				2	\$4,200	

The Definitive Guide to

Data-Driven Forecasting

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Introduction

Most companies struggle to create an accurate sales forecast. Poor pipeline visibility and inaccurate, intuition-based predictions from reps leads to a culture where the end of a quarter is often a surprise and attaining sales quota is left up to chance. In fact, industry surveys report that **only 40% of forecasted opportunities actually close**. And even those deals that actually do come through are often significantly different than the deal originally forecasted. If you're one of these companies you are leaving deals on the table, losing credibility, and ultimately jeopardizing your company's viability.

What can you do? As we've said, sales forecasting is hard and few companies get it right. Because of this, many sales teams accept unreliable forecasts and all the negative consequences that come with them. The best sales teams are finally moving beyond traditional, legacy forecasting methods and beginning to adopt the principles of data-driven forecasting.

In this eBook, we will analyze the common **problems of traditional forecasting methods, and the best ways to overcome them to achieve a reliable, data-driven forecast**.

In particular, we will explain:

- The 7 common problems that lead to inaccurate forecasts
- The 7 components of data-driven forecasting
- The 10 common characteristics that kill your forecast

Chapter // 1

Common Problems of Traditional Sales Forecasting

Summary

A sales team can't generate predictable revenue when it routinely misses its forecast and more than half of its reps don't make their quota. Why is forecasting so hard? What is preventing sales teams from accurately predicting which deals they'll close and how much new revenue they'll book?

In this chapter, we look at the 7 most common barriers to an accurate sales forecast, including:

- The flaws of intuition
- The limitations of CRMs
- The consequences of stale data

The 7 Barriers to an Accurate Forecast

1. Relying on a Legacy, Intuition-Based or “Finger in the Wind” Approach

How do you know if a certain opportunity is going to close? The true answer is that you don't: **any number of external forces can prevent an opportunity from making it past the finish line.** Yet many sales organizations still believe they can separate the winners and losers in their pipelines simply by “going with their gut.”

While reps' instincts shouldn't be ignored completely, the truth is that reps' predictions about an opportunity's likelihood of converting are far from perfect. Organizations that base their forecasts primarily on reps' instincts will quickly learn that a guess is just a guess, and that intuition cannot be the main ingredient in a sales forecast.

2. CRM Data Issues

Most sales teams rely on the data they input into their CRMs for their forecasts. This is a good place to start, but it is important to remember that sales **CRMs like Salesforce.com are hardly the exhaustive, infallible data sources they are thought to be,** and that reps are not perfect users of them.

Think about how your own team uses its CRM. Are they perfectly diligent about logging every activity they perform? Are they careful about updating their opportunities when a new piece of information comes in? And even the data they do put in – is it 100% accurate? How did they decide on the opportunity's expected contract value and close date? Although they may seem insignificant, these pieces of missing or conjectured data can quickly skew a forecast.

The image shows a screenshot of a CRM form titled "Qualifying Information". The form has a yellow header bar. Below the header, there are four text input fields arranged in a 2x2 grid. The top-left field is labeled "Budget Notes" and contains the text "No budget yet.". The top-right field is labeled "Pain/Need Notes" and contains the text "Unknown". The bottom-left field is labeled "Evaluation Process Notes" and is empty. The bottom-right field is labeled "Timeframe Notes" and is empty. The "Pain/Need Notes" field has a red border around it, indicating it might be a required field or has an error.

Figure 1: An incomplete CRM entry

3. Common Spreadsheet Problems

When a sales team is young, sales managers typically cobble together solutions for common reports like forecasting. These ad hoc solutions may work when a team is small and deals are trickling in, but **as the team grows (and the data becomes less manageable), this approach begins to show its cracks.** Small errors begin to multiply, and forecasts inevitably veer off course. Sometimes this is the result of data being left out altogether, and sometimes it's the consequence of data input errors and spreadsheet flaws. But whatever the case, manually updating spreadsheets is a surefire way to end up with an inaccurate forecast.

Another problem with relying on spreadsheets is the difficulty of filtering the information in such a way that you get a clear, coherent picture. Trying to filter by specific opportunity fields or by employee is difficult or impossible in traditional spreadsheets. A sales forecast is not a single entity, it is a large, complicated collection of interconnected data points. Understanding how these pieces of information relate to each other, though, is almost impossible in traditional spreadsheets.

4. A Lack of Real-Time Data

Typically, sales managers are forced to use stale data when coming up with their forecasts. What's the team's average win rate? How long does the average deal take to close? **Using last year's (or even last quarter's) figures for these metrics could derail your forecast.** If you want the most accurate forecast, you need to use up-to-the-minute data – otherwise you could be making a prediction for a sales team that no longer exists in circumstances that are no longer applicable.

5. Sandbagging and Happy Ears

How well are your reps able to predict the likelihood of a certain deal closing? As we discussed in the first item on this list, intuition is not a friend of accurate forecasting. But the general unreliability of intuition isn't the only reason that a rep's best guess is not good enough for a forecast – **Reps often fall victim to two opposing tendencies when forecasting their own deals: sandbagging and happy ears.**

Whether consciously or not, many reps underestimate their sales forecast, a practice known as sandbagging.

Sandbagging - When reps intentionally underestimate the number of deals they expect

to close in a given selling period.

No rep wants to come in short of their forecast, so they sometimes offer a lower bookings total than they expect, setting the rest of the team up for a pleasant surprise come quarter's end.

Conversely, some reps are too confident about the opportunities in their pipelines. This enthusiasm sometimes causes them to think they'll close more deals than they actually will, which is often known as "happy ears."

Happy Ears - When reps are overly optimistic about their chances of converting a given opportunity.

Both of these tendencies are understandable, but they're also major reasons why forecasts built around reps' intuitions are so often wrong.

6. Who Has Accountability for Missed Forecasts?

Unless you hold your sales team accountable for a missed forecast, you are unlikely to see the accuracy of your forecast improve over time. Too often, sales teams make a forecast but then do nothing with it once the quarter ends. This prevents the reps from learning from their forecasting mistakes and iteratively improving their process over time.

Successful sales teams make their forecasts public and **conduct extensive post-mortems after every quarter** to diagnose how and why the results differed from their predictions. Additionally, the best sales teams use forecasts not only as a way to punish or reward their reps, but also as a means for getting their reps to buy into the sales process and better understand how their actions affect overall sales performance.

7. No Coaching or Training

Effective forecasting is not an innate skill: it is something that has best practices and that can be improved through targeted coaching. Deciding how to weight various factors and spot red flags is an essential sales skill, and one that you should be sure to instill in your team if you place a priority on accurate forecasts.

The remainder of this eBook will focus on just that: imparting the skills and best practices of data-driven forecasting to your reps.

Chapter // 2

Best Practices of Data-Driven Sales Forecasting

Summary

Now you know what stands between your sales team and an accurate forecast, but the most important question still remains: What can you do to overcome these obstacles and create a reliable forecast? The answer is to use accurate, real-time data and several industry best practices to ensure that you are grounding your forecast in the proper foundation.

In this chapter, we will explore the 7 keys to an accurate forecast, including:

- The right forecasting stages
- Your company's 4 essential averages
- The 6 key deal metrics

The 7 Steps to a Data-Driven Forecast

1. Forecast by Opportunity Stage

Many sales managers rely on forecast stages – such as commit or upside – when they sit down to predict the deals that will close before the quarter's end. This approach is understandable (and deeply ingrained) but it is wrong: These stages rely on reps' judgments and intuition and underemphasize the importance of the buyer's perspective. Instead, **sales teams should rely on what pipeline stage the opportunity is actually in:** qualifying, demo, closing, etc.

Using opportunity stages instead of forecast stages ensures that reps are not letting their "happy ears" get the better of them and that they are properly considering timing when making their forecasts. Opportunity stages should be based on where the potential customer stands in the sales process, not on whether a rep thinks they will eventually become a customer. Even when a rep does everything right, her steps do not reflect the customer's probability to buy. Additionally, **opportunity stages are more uniform across your entire sales team**, instead of variable from rep to rep.

Opportunity Stage	Prospect Buying Action to Next Stage
Qualification	Agrees to a call with Sales Rep
Demo	Reviews demo and agrees to trial
Trial	Completes trial and requests quote
Negotiation	Reviews quote and responds with counter

Figure 2: Opportunity stages and the action needed to move it to the next stage.

A sales forecasting system based on opportunity stages and the average conversion rates from one stage to the next is data-driven, objective and more accurate because it is based on analysis of recent sales and objective information about open opportunities. Here are the key guidelines for forecasting by opportunity stage:

1. Opportunity stages should **span the entire funnel** from "New" to "Closed."
2. You should not have an opportunity that is **not in one of the stages**.
3. The stages must be distinct enough that **opportunities cannot be in two stages at once**.
4. Lastly, you should be able to measure a gradual drop-off in conversion rate as an opportunity progresses down the funnel. If you see **drastic conversion-rate drop at certain stages** or, conversely, **no drop-off at all**, you should conduct further analysis to make sure your stages are properly defined.

2. Separate Your Pipeline Management Meetings and Forecast Meetings

It is common practice for sales managers to hold a single weekly meeting when they review both reps' pipelines and forecasts. Though they are both meant to monitor sales, leading indicators and strategy, they should each have a distinct focus and objective.

Pipeline review meetings should focus on the top of the funnel and early-stage opportunities.

These meetings, which should be held every other week, are designed to make sure reps have enough early-stage opportunities to be successful in the future.

Forecast meetings should focus on late-stage opportunities expected to close in the current selling period. During these meetings, which should be held every Monday morning, the sales manager should closely inspect each late-stage opportunity and help coach reps to the finish line and identify potential obstacles and red flags.

You can find a blueprint for an effective forecasting meeting in the next chapter.

3. Inspect the 6 Essential Deal Metrics

One of the keys to an accurate forecast is understanding that each opportunity is unique and should be evaluated based on its own set of characteristics. The ways in which these opportunities are different – size, age, stage, etc. – have an enormous impact on how they behave in your sales funnel and the likelihood of them ultimately converting to Closed-Won.

How do you do this? The answer is by analyzing each open opportunity in terms of the 6 essential opportunity metrics: age, stage, size, effort, engagement and slippage. Evaluating each opportunity in terms of these metrics allows you to ascribe an expected “forecast contribution” to each opportunity, which, when combined, gives you your data-driven forecast.

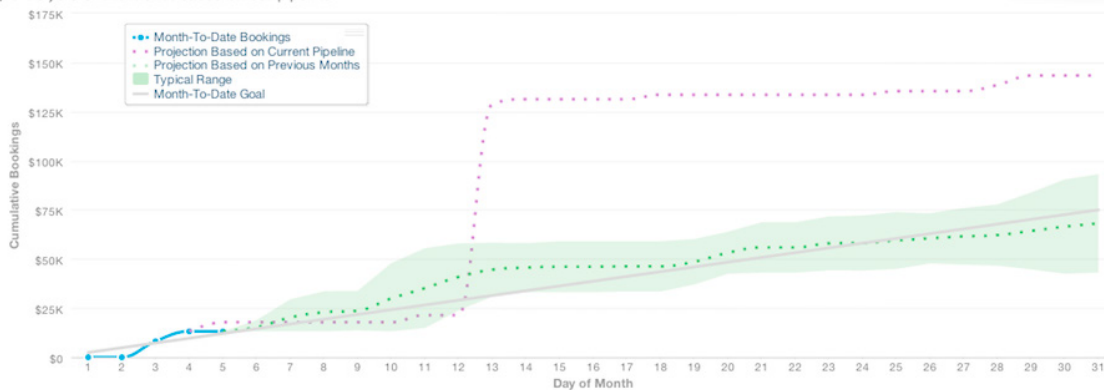
What do you need to know about these 6 key metrics to allow you to come up with an accurate forecast? In the following pages we will look at each metric individually and explain how you can use it to create a reliable forecast.

Here is what you need to know about the **6 essential opportunity metrics**:

1. **Stage:** Once you start forecasting by opportunity stage, you will have a much clearer picture of how an opportunity's current stage affects its likelihood of closing during the current selling period. **As your opportunities move from one stage to the next, their likelihood of becoming Closed-Won increases.**
2. **Age:** The amount of time an opportunity has spent in your pipeline also says a lot about its chances of converting. **Stale opportunities that linger in your pipeline are less likely to close**, so you should analyze all open opportunities by the amount of time they have been in your pipeline.
3. **Size:** **An opportunity's size affects Win Rate and Sales Cycle**, so it's important to look for (and flag) opportunities that fall outside your normal deal range.

What is our bookings forecast?

\$143,350 this month based on our pipeline



SELECTION: All | Top 15 | None | Filtering | Export

Close Date	Opportunity	Owner	1. Stage	2. Days in Stage	3. Total Value	Personal Win Rate	Company Win Rate	Forecast Contribution
03 Mar 2014	Opportunity #750	Blaise Pascal	Stage 2	2	\$4,200	100%	100%	\$4,200
03 Mar 2014	Opportunity #60	Henry Cavendish	Stage 3	2	\$1,440	50%	48%	\$1,440
03 Mar 2014	Opportunity #601	Johann Wolfgang Dobreiner	Stage 2	2	\$2,520	61%	58%	\$2,520
04 Mar 2014	Opportunity #772	Johann Wolfgang Dobreiner	Stage 3	1	\$5,040	47%	61%	\$5,040
05 Mar 2014	Opportunity #298	Blaise Pascal	Stage 2	46	\$7,980	58%	47%	\$4,628
11 Mar 2014	Opportunity #764	Max Planck	Stage 3	15	\$3,780	17%	61%	\$643
11 Mar 2014	Opportunity #475	Louis Pasteur	Stage 3	276	\$6,000	50%	61%	\$3,000
13 Mar 2014	Opportunity #512	Johann Wolfgang Dobreiner	Stage 2	3	\$600	48%	47%	\$288
13 Mar 2014	Opportunity #135	Max Planck	Stage 3	15	\$3,360	17%	61%	\$571

Figure 3: A data-driven forecast report that factors in each opportunity's stage, age and size.

- Effort:** How much effort a rep has put into an opportunity also says a lot about that opportunity's likelihood of closing. Conventional sales wisdom holds that the more effort a rep expends working an opportunity, the more likely that opportunity is to convert into a deal. However, it is worth noting that many sales experts have started to go the other way, arguing that reps tend to chase opportunities they feel slipping away. Because of this, sales managers may want to diagnose aggressively worked opportunities in their forecasts. Of course, how exactly effort translates to won deals is circumstantial and depends largely on your industry and sales process.
- Engagement:** Closing an opportunity typically requires a lot of activities from the rep working it, especially near the finish line. Therefore, you should **monitor recent rep engagement** (as defined by activities such as a call or a value change logged in a CRM) to ensure that all late-stage opportunities are actively being worked on.

What is the current state of our pipeline?

\$671,604 of value with close dates in the next 30 days

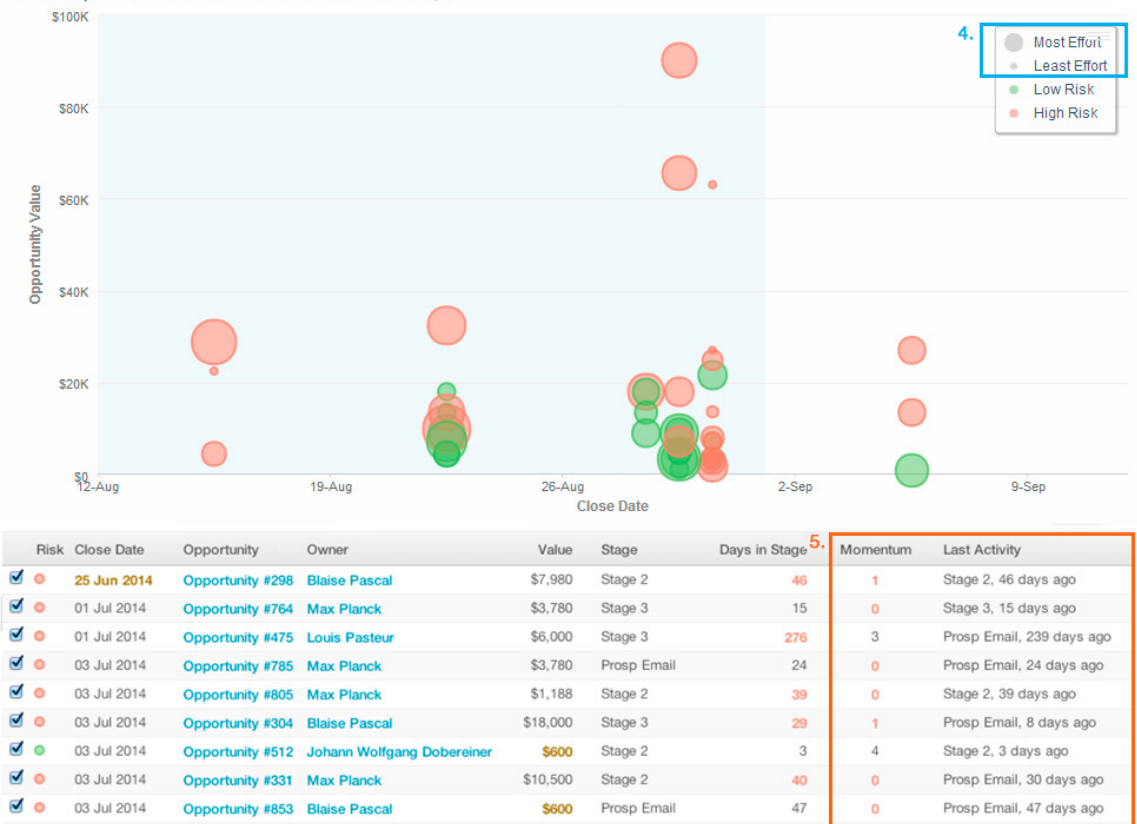


Figure 4: Analyzing your sales team's current set of open opportunities by effort, recent activity, and momentum is essential for correctly predicting which are most likely to close.

6. **Slippage:** Frequent changes to an opportunity – either in terms of close date or expected sales price – can be a bad sign for an opportunity's chance of closing. **Flag opportunities that have had a lot of changes** and ask the reps working them whether they should really be included in this period's forecast.

Which opportunities have changed close dates or value?

63 opportunities have changed in the previous 7 days

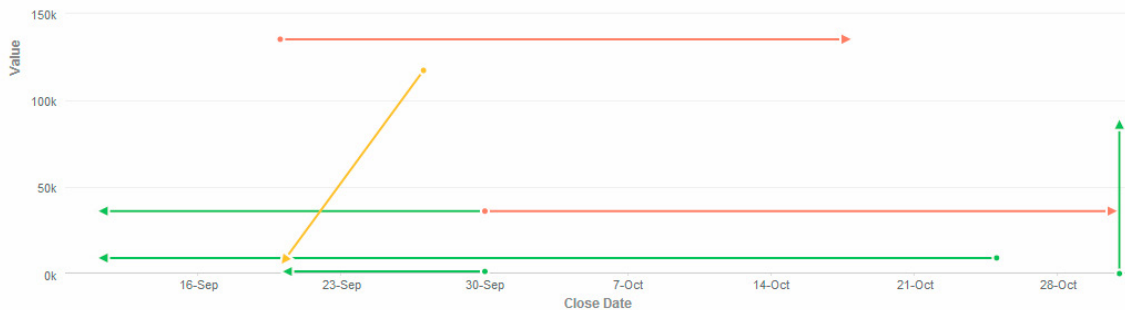


Figure 5: Tracking close-date and value changes to open opportunities helps sales reps and managers better separate buyers and non-buyers in their pipelines..

4. Know Your Company's 4 Averages

Once you know how to evaluate the specific late-stage opportunities in your pipeline, you should start looking at how your team has historically handled opportunities with similar attributes.

Here are the 4 company-wide averages you should use as a guide, and why:

1. **Average Sales Cycle (for won deals):** This tells you how long it typically takes one of your sales reps to move an opportunity to Closed-Won, and gives you a benchmark for how long winning opportunities tend to spend in your pipeline. This metric is important for assessing whether an opportunity has spent too long in the pipeline (or, better yet, a specific stage) to be considered likely to convert.
2. **Average Sales Cycle (for lost deals):** Similarly, you should analyze how long losing opportunities typically spend in your pipeline. If your average Closed-Lost opportunity spends 4x as much time in your pipeline as your average Closed-Won opportunity, this can help you quickly spot likely losers by analyzing how old certain opportunities are. Is that opportunity that has been in your pipeline 6x as long as your Win Cycle really going to close this quarter?

How do won and lost opportunities compare?

Custom Last This To Date Trailing

7D 30D 90D 12M

190

opportunities created in the previous 12 months were subsequently won.

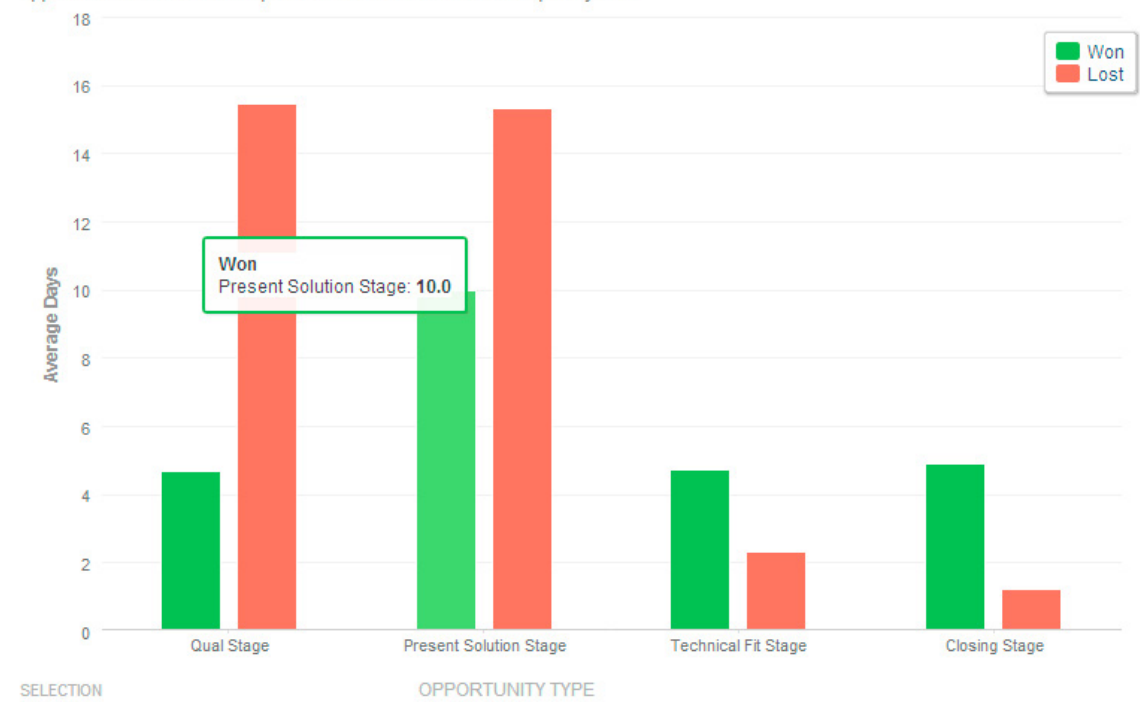


Figure 6: The image above shows sales cycle for won deals (in green) and lost deals (in red).

3. **Average Deal Size:** Most companies have better success closing deals within a certain size range. Identifying your sweet spot (by analyzing your average deal size) is a great way to spot outliers in your forecast and adjust your forecast accordingly.

How are our bookings trending over time?

\$774,985 booked last year (2013)

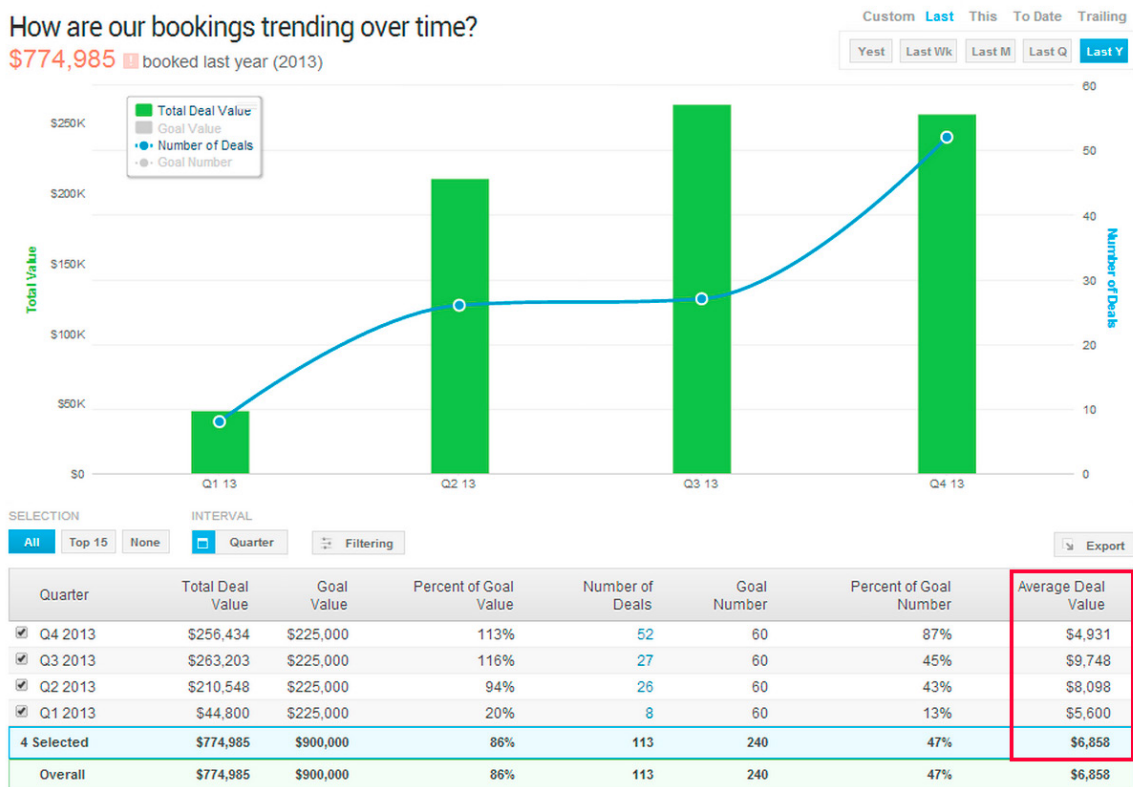


Figure 7: Bookings growth and average deal size over time.

- Average Conversion Rate (from each stage):** An opportunity in the closing stage of your sales process is much more likely to convert into a deal than an opportunity only in the qualifying stage. Understanding this – and exactly how much likelier it is – can help you improve the accuracy of your forecast and better understand your sales process.

You should know your company average for the conversion rates for an opportunity in every stage of your sales funnel.

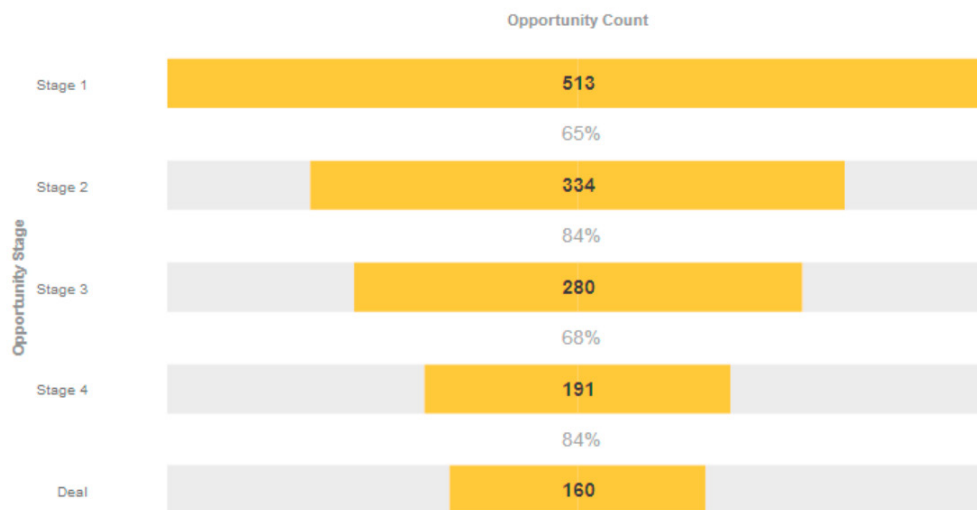


Figure 8: The sales funnel above shows conversion rates for each stage in the sales process.

5. Know Each Rep's 4 Averages

Knowing your company's 4 averages will give you a good idea of how your overall sales team has historically performed with deals of certain sizes, ages and stages. But for a more granular understanding, you will want to **look at your late-stage open opportunities on a rep-by-rep basis**.

Rep performance can vary significantly, so looking at the historical performance of the particular rep who owns an opportunity, and how he or she had historically performed working similar opportunities in terms of the 4 averages listed above, allows you to make a much more fine-grain analysis of its likelihood of closing.

6. Look for Early Warning Signs

The longer a questionable opportunity lingers in your funnel, the more likely it is to throw off your forecast. Have your reps stay close to the late-stage opportunities they are working so they can recognize warning signs – like slippage, negative velocity and stalling – as early as possible.

Holding regular pipeline review meetings with each quota-carrying rep will help you ensure that your reps are carefully monitoring their open opportunities so they can quickly spot strange behavior or early warning signs.

7. Manage Your Forecast Killers

As we discussed in the section on the 6 essential deal metrics, the particular characteristics of the late-stage opportunities in your sales funnel have a huge impact on how likely they are to close – and whether or not you should include those opportunities in this sales period's forecast. But what are the characteristics that should raise red flags?

These are the 10 forecast killers, and how you should manage them:

1. **Timing:** More often than not, buyers know what they're looking for and generally don't hesitate to buy once they find it. Therefore, opportunities that linger in the pipeline are less likely to convert than quickly progressing opportunities. Look at your late-stage opportunities, identify opportunities that have lingered in your pipeline for significantly longer than your average sales cycle, and flag them.
2. **Average Deal Size:** Most companies have better luck closing deals of a certain size. Opportunities that are more than 3x your company's average sales price typically convert at lower rates and take longer to convert when they do, and should be flagged or removed from your forecast.
3. **Slippage:** Frequent close-date pushes and sales-price changes are indicators that an opportunity may be unlikely to convert. If an opportunity in your pipeline changes close date or value three times or more, start a conversation with the rep who owns it and decide whether or not it truly belongs in your forecast.
4. **Stalled Engagement:** If a deal is scheduled to close soon, but the rep working it has not logged an activity in your CRM for more than two weeks, it may not belong in your forecast.
5. **Stage:** Only late-stage opportunities should be included in your forecast. Regardless of when a rep believes a deal will close, you should only count the opportunities that have officially progressed to the bottom of the funnel.
6. **Negative Velocity:** Opportunities that stall or move backwards in the late stages of the funnel should be removed from your forecast, as their chance of converting diminishes with each day.
7. **Authority:** Deals can only be signed by decision-makers, and if your rep has a late-stage opportunity in his pipeline but he isn't yet talking to a decision-maker, that opportunity should be flagged or removed from your forecast.

8. **Lead Source:** Not all lead sources create opportunities that have equal chances of converting. Analyze your historical win rates for different lead sources and go through your forecast and flag opportunities from low-performing lead sources.
9. **No Competitor:** Customers who are ready to buy have typically analyzed the other options in the marketplace. If they haven't compared your product to others, you should initiate a conversation with the rep who owns the opportunity to see if the opportunity really belongs in your forecast.
10. **Late Random Additions:** Large deals (at least 2x your average deal size) that are added to your forecast at the last minute should be flagged as at-risk.

Chapter // 3

How to Prepare for Your Weekly Forecasting Meeting

Summary

Once you understand how to use sales data to overcome the common barriers to an accurate sales forecast, it's time to start putting those principles in action and establishing a repeatable process for data-driven sales forecasting. The first part of this process is structuring and scheduling a weekly forecast meeting with your quota-carrying reps. In this chapter, we explain the fundamentals of an effective weekly forecasting meeting and what you should do to plan for yours, including:

- Focusing on the right opportunities
- Analyzing the 4 deal metrics
- Folding in rep instincts

1. Study the 4 Deal Metrics

Before you do anything else, you should review your 4 company averages:

1. Average Sales Cycle
2. Average Loss Cycle
3. Average Deal Size
4. Average Conversion Rates by Stage

Familiarizing yourself with these metrics will help you quickly identify outlying opportunities and give you good talking points to raise with your reps, such as: “This opportunity has been in your pipeline for almost 60 days, which is about 3x our company’s average for won deals. Do you think we should include this opportunity in your forecast?”

2. Analyze the Specific Rep's Historical Performance KPIs

Once you're familiar with your company's averages, zero in on each rep's personal averages. When talking to him or her about a particular opportunity, have their specific metrics in front of you so you can identify potential issues and ask targeted questions, like: “This opportunity is still in the qualifying stage and historically you only win 15% of opportunities in that stage – is there a reason you think it should be in this quarter's forecast?”

This is also a good time to review each rep's historical forecast accuracy. How accurate have they been in the past when forecasting which of their opportunities will close? Has this rate been rising or falling over time? If you see that a particular rep is more often wrong than right with his personal forecasting, you may want to take his predictions with a grain of salt and, more importantly, start a discussion with him about what he can do to improve the accuracy of his forecasts.

3. Ask Your Reps for Their Instincts

Although (as we discussed earlier) your reps' instincts should not be a primary ingredient in your forecast, they do have a certain amount of value. Reps can sometimes understand their opportunities from perspectives that you can't get from data alone, so it is always worth taking their own instincts into account – even if it's just for a tie-breaker or additional color commentary.

4. Focus on Late-Stage Opportunities

We've mentioned this before, but it's worth emphasizing: Forecasting meetings are about opportunities in the **last one or two sales stages**. Discussing earlier opportunities is typically a waste of time, or worse, a distraction from what really matters. Keep your meetings focused and only have in-depth conversations about deals that are expected to close during the current selling period.

Conclusion

A reliable sales forecast is not only a powerful tool for achieving results, it is also an indicator that your sales team is data-driven, process-oriented, and forward-looking. No sales team should settle for anything less.

In this eBook, we helped take the guesswork out of forecasting by:

1. Analyzing the barriers to an effective forecast
2. Detailing the steps to a data-driven forecast
3. Creating a blueprint for the perfect forecasting meeting

Between them, these 3 steps will help you do everything you need to achieve a reliable, data-driven forecast.



Forecasting for Sales Leaders
See it in InsightSquared

- ✓ Interactive Forecast Report
- ✓ Presentation-Ready Charts
- ✓ Filter by Any Salesforce Fields

[See It Yourself >](#)

Close Date	Opportunity	Owner	Stage	Deal Size	Total Deal	Personal Win Rate	Company Win Rate	Forecast Contribution
01 Jul 2014	Opportunity A	Blake Pearson	Open	17	\$1,100	100%	100%	\$1,100
01 Jul 2014	Opportunity B	Blake Pearson	Open	17	\$2,500	100%	100%	\$2,500
01 Jul 2014	Opportunity C	Blake Pearson	Open	16	\$2,800	100%	100%	\$2,800
07 Jul 2014	Opportunity D	Blake Pearson	Open	16	\$274	100%	100%	\$274
07 Jul 2014	Opportunity E	Blake Pearson	Open	16	\$1,100	100%	100%	\$1,100

Meet the Authors



Zorian Rotenberg

Zorian is an advisor to InsightSquared and experienced Sales and Marketing executive. He has been on management teams of several high-growth global software companies, ranging between \$8 Million to \$100 Million in sales, all growing over 100% annually. He was also the CEO of StarWind Software, a global software company with customers in over 50 countries. Zorian has been a speaker at a number of industry conferences and online events including the American Association of Inside Sales Professionals (AA-ISP), Inside Sales Summit, Chief Sales Officer (CSO) Insights, Mass Technology Leadership Council, The Conference Board, Heartland Technology Group, and B2BCamp among others. He has written for and contributed to The WSJ Accelerators Blog, Top Sales World, Salesforce.com blog, Revenue Marketing Podcast, DemandGen Marketing Report, OpenView Labs blog, and iMedia among others. Zorian has a degree in Finance and minors in Applied Mathematics and in Computer Science from Lehigh University and earned his MBA from Harvard Business School.



Mike Baker

Mike is a content writer and journalist who enjoys diving into complex issues and exploring the world of data-driven business intelligence. Before coming to InsightSquared, Mike earned an English degree from Oberlin College and wrote for several newspapers, websites and marketing firms around the country.

#1 for Salesforce Analytics

About InsightSquared

InsightSquared is the #1 Salesforce Analytics product for small and midsize businesses (SMB). Unlike legacy business intelligence platforms, InsightSquared can be deployed affordably in less than a day without any integration costs and comes preloaded with reports that real business people can use. Hundreds of companies and thousands of users around the world use InsightSquared's award-winning analytics to maximize sales performance, increase team productivity and close more deals. Based in Cambridge, Mass., InsightSquared was recently named one of the "Best Places to Work in Massachusetts" by the Boston Business Journal.

For more information, visit www.insightsquared.com.

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