## Tapping into AI to Ignite Selling of Complex IT Solutions

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Driving business outcomes is the goal of every CEO. Using technology to automate introduces new challenges, new opportunities, and many potential benefits. Even in the world of networking, where hard-wired systems are being transformed to be virtual, creating lakes of big data is the new norm. All that data is useless unless it delivers business value. Combined with Software Defined Networking (SDN) and Network Functions Virtualization (NFV), sophisticated data correlation techniques and Artificial Intelligence (AI) promise a new generation of capabilities that will bring dramatic business-oriented benefits.
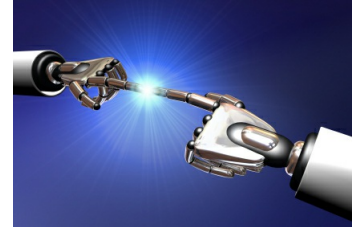
Beyond Customer Experience Management

Much industry discussion and activity has focused on applying analytics to network and customer data to improve customer experience and increase loyalty.What other low-hanging fruit is ripe for AI and big data analytics? First think of where there is extensive reliance on manual, ad hoc processes, and challenges with highly complex solutions. Think of where there is detailed knowledge in the minds of a handful of experts and issues around one-off decision-making. When considering these factors, the low hanging fruit are the
IT sales processes for enterprise accounts! AI, analytics, and automation can ignite the selling motion for complex IT solutions, resulting in more "won deals," as well as reduced sales expenses, with payoffs that go directly to the bottom line.

Manual Sales Processes Squeeze Profitability

Selling business outcomes via technology-enabled solutions to enterprises can be highly profitable and more lucrative than consumer services. But, too often, this potential is not realized because unlike the consumer market, enterprise-grade solutions are complex and based on unique and dynamic business requirements.

The reality is that to achieve business outcomes by creating accurate proposals and quotes, the

sales team needs to stay up to date on the current solution portfolio, deployment options, incentives and promotions, and reference architectures — all of which continuously evolve.

Arduous Enterprise Deal and Business Management

Senior sales and procurement managers also face challenges. While opportunities are managed and tracked in customer relationship management (CRM) tools, design and proposal generation is typically not easily tracked and analyzed.

If any profitability analyses are done at all, they are manual processes that piece together ever-changing data from numerous data sources. The processes are arduous, time-consuming, unsystematic, and therefore error prone.

Automating the Sales Process

To beat the competition, solution providers must speed time-to-quote and ensure their solutions can be designed, delivered, and implemented quickly, accurately, and profitably.

Sales enablement tools such as CRM and Configure, Price, Quote (CPQ) solutions increase efficiency by automating specific parts of the sales process.

For example, automated, data-driven solution design engines improve the lead-to-requirements-to-order process for enterprise IT sales. With easy access to a wealth of relevant content, solution architects can quickly build validated graphical solutions that adhere to vendor interoperability rules, and attributes.

Details, Details: an Industry-Tailored Data Model

Validation and configuration rules are the tip of the IT sales "big data" iceberg. A comprehensive knowledge base includes up-to-date product and service catalogs from multiple manufacturers and deal and promotion feeds.

At the core, is a data model that supports an extensive knowledge base with millions of routes and rules, parent-child relationships, component attributes, pricing, images, number of ports, power consumption and many more. The knowledge base can include multi-vendor and cross-vendor relationships among components, such as associating specific headsets with specific phones.

The data model extends to services, software defined implementations, cloud and any solution that is offered. Migration paths can be modeled to support land and expand strategies.

Changing the Sales Motion with AI

Rather than just using automation to speed the existing linear IT sales process, AI operating on big data can make fundamental changes to the sales motion itself, such as influencing sales behavior early to focus on business outcomes and profitability.

AI enables a more holistic, dynamic approach that informs the sales motion or process end-to-end, from discovering existing infrastructure to solution design to ordering and provisioning.

AI also has a unique opportunity to enable and streamline management of the IT solution sales business across the entire sales lifecycle.

AI and Big Data: More Than Dashboards

AI and big data are not just about dashboards, analytics, and process enablement. The real value comes from applying AI to big data in order to identify and execute business actions—to define what the selling motion or process should be. The selling motion is *the* action of the sales process: getting the right solutions at the right price into the right hands at the right time.

Selling complex IT solutions can be a long and complex process. Changing that process to be insightful, fast, and simple while focusing on customer benefits and seller profitability is the real opportunity and value of data- and algorithm-driven AI. Here are some examples:

Maximize service-attach rates

Many solution providers have experienced declining professional services profitability, due to low attach rates, quoting vendor services and discounting.

How can AI and big data help? They can help create a centrally managed catalog of professional services tasks and data that are always up-to-date and capable of being seamlessly distributed globally in real time to all users. Through AI, the professional services information is automatically associated with products and solutions.

Automating the service-attach to the quotes allows the designer to automatically include the tasks, resources required, and their costs, including travel and expenses and third-party costs.

Leading with services becomes the new norm and complete product and service quotes are delivered faster and more accurately, increasing margins and customer satisfaction.

Suggest alternate parts based on business needs

Similarly, by applying AI algorithms to product information, alternate products can be automatically suggested during the design process, influencing seller behavior early in the process. The alternates may, for example offer, higher profitability, help reduce excess inventory, or adhere to a company best practice such as leading with Power over Ethernet (PoE)-based solutions.

As a result, the sellers' behavior is influenced in the most profitable directions for their company as early in the process as possible.

Enable easy collaboration and sharing

Sales organizations need to collaborate effectively with their teams, their vendors and suppliers, and of course with their customers. A dynamic, AI-driven approach enables collaboration, integration, and project and data sharing. The solution does the heavy lifting and provides an integrated offering with built-in collaboration across the sales lifecycle.

The end result is delivery of more sales proposals, better offerings that comply with company best practices, and more efficient workflows that are based on consistent data.

Keep tabs on the business

How can managers understand exactly how they, the business, and their teams are doing and where they need to improve? AI and big data can provide easy access to business intelligence and actionable insights.

Business management typically relies on multiple internal and external tools and reports. Any analysis or validation is typically performed manually and as needed, rather than as part of normal workflow processes.

Staying abreast of technology supplier incentives and promotions is daunting: minutiae on up-front discounts and back-end rebate programs as well as programs based on employee certifications and specializations can be overwhelming. For most solution providers, these programs have a significant impact on margin and profitability. For large companies, the impact can be in the millions

of dollars. Managers use time-consuming manual processes to piece together ever-changing qualification and compliance criteria from complicated data sources and vendor systems.

AI can increase profitability through deal registration management, greater program participation, and tighter relationships with suppliers and distributors. All deal data can be consolidated in one place, including direct, indirect, and distributor data, with comprehensive data mining and drill-down capabilities.

At a glance, managers can understand margins, increase revenues, drive best practices, and improve processes.

Alerts can be provided to potential situations that either invalidate or increase the rebate, with relevant information provided to dispute transactions with the vendor to ensure payment for all earned transactions.

Reviewing proposals for increased profitability

Final reviews of Bills of Materials (BOMs) for profitability enhancements are often desirable. To manually analyze BOMs, solution providers gather information from multiple vendor systems and then match to the BOM's SKUs. For example, solution providers may inadvertently sell stock that will be end-of-sale soon, thereafter impacting customer satisfaction.

AI can dramatically simplify the process of analyzing BOMs so optimization can become part of the sales workflow on every deal. AI algorithms automatically analyze relevant promotion, and other information gathered from multiple vendor systems. Insights are summarized in a dashboard with deep drill-down capabilities. Opportunities to increase margin can be identified, as well as the actions to take to capture rebates, align SKUs, and identify products that should be upgraded.

Elevating Sales Business Using Big Data and AI

The application of AI techniques to sales' big data can have a significant impact on business outcomes. It can dynamically impact selling motion and workflow efficiencies. AI can drive sales behavior toward business goals throughout the sales cycle, while eliminating manual analysis and the need to query multiple complex vendor systems.

Insights can be provided automatically on risks and opportunities so sales organizations can spend the time taking action, not plowing through data. Increased deal profitability and team productivity result in competitive advantage.

SDN and SD-WAN are making networks more agile, freeing enterprise customers from vendor lock-in, and ensuring network optimization. These technologies enable data centers to coordinate and manage a variety of service types dynamically, which is key to many business transformations. This combined with the new generation of AI capabilities is already bringing business benefits to solution providers.