

SALES OPS IS DEAD

What Leading-Edge Companies are Doing
to Elevate the Role of Sales Ops

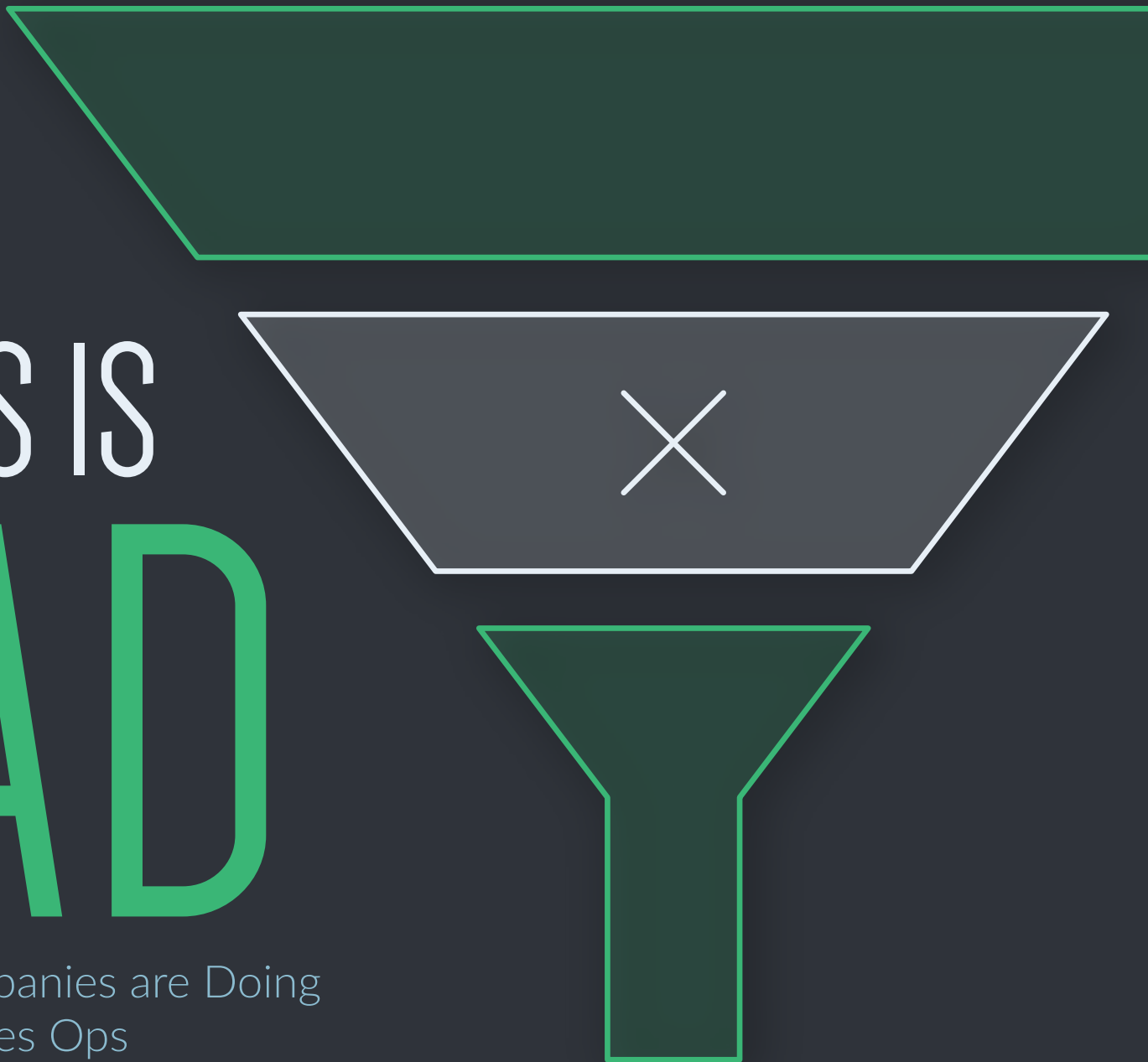


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MEET THE SPEAKERS



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Gabe Larsen is the VP of Marketing & Sales Development in InsideSales.com. He's also the host of the Sales Secrets Podcast.



CHRIS DENT



[Chris Dent](#) is an expert principal from [Bain & Company](#). He's part of the Commercial Excellence practice, which tackles all things sales and marketing.

Before working at Bain & Company, Dent ran Commercial Strategy and Operations. He's also a former salesperson and marketer.

Is Sales Ops Dead? Why It's Still Important Now

The big question is this: Is Sales Ops dead?

According to Dent, Sales Ops is most certainly not dead. In fact, it evolved — its mandate expanded and it's now more important now than ever before.

Sales Ops is **foundational**. Every good go-to-market engine has a strong Sales Ops team behind it driving results.



The current state of sales is more complex than ever before. Here are some statistics that drive home the point that Sales Ops is still essential:

- **Reps don't spend as much time selling as they should.** This is because their jobs are harder — they have a lot on their plate but see little results. Sales Ops can help address this problem.
- **Sales teams use insights and analytics to drive results and figure out where the team should spend their time on.** Only about 50% of sales leaders use marketing intelligence to determine where they should place bets within their go-to market model.
- **A lot of high-performing sales organizations are investing much more significantly and 2.5x more quickly on inside sales capabilities.** More customers are completely happy to buy things over the phone than before.
- **There is a technology explosion.** There are over 7,000 technology applications that sales and/or marketing can use to drive the business, and it's just very difficult to navigate.

The Expanded Mandate of Sales Ops

The Sales Ops mandate has also expanded. Aside from keeping activities running on time, there are several new mandates which describe the Sales Ops job:

- **Free up selling time** for the sales reps
- **Drive win rate or average order size** and actually have direct commercial responsibility
- **Ensure** the return on sales is as high as possible

These are the big ones that really change how we regard Sales Ops.

Commercial Operations

Dent also explained that what he meant by Sales Ops “evolving” is, in fact, Commercial Operations. This is a combination of traditional Sales Ops, and has four areas:

- **Commercial Strategy and Planning** — This means setting the playing field. What is the actual go-to market strategy? How do you bring that to life from a market opportunity, to how you set coverage, and to how you pay reps?
- **Talent and Enablement** — It’s all about knowing what a good sales rep looks like, what they do differently, and how to onboard them. Here, you also make the right content available to your talent and provide the right training accordingly.
- **Sales and Marketing Execution** — This is traditionally the core of the core for Sales and Marketing Ops teams. Here, you find ways to generate insights for the sales force. You also find ways to manage the cadence and help close deals.
- **Data Infrastructure, Applications, and Insights** — The applications refer to what you’re using. The insights are the ones you’re able to generate or the advanced analytics you are using along with those.

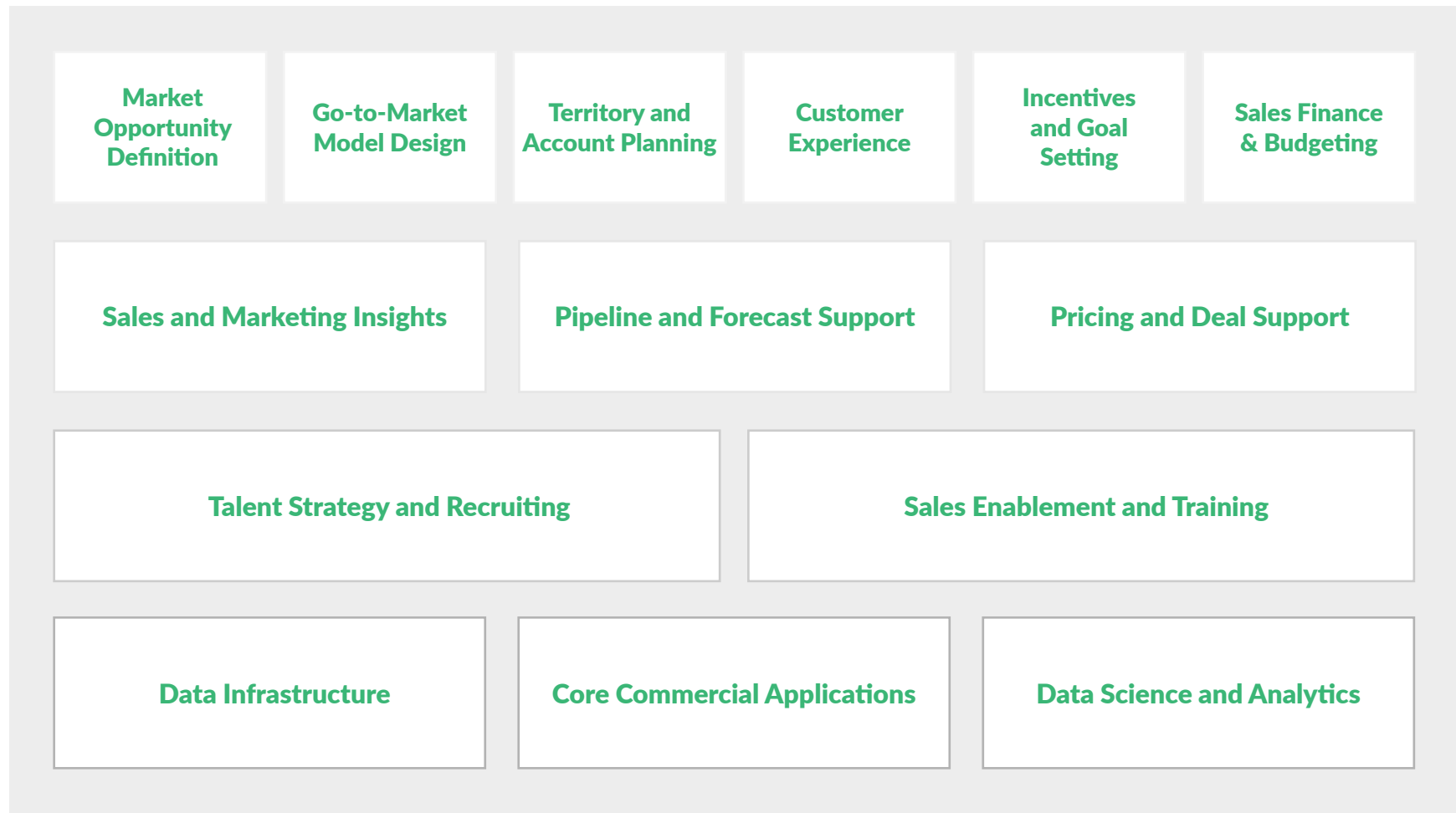
Where Does Marketing Ops Play a Role in Commercial Ops?

You may also ask, “**how is Marketing Ops playing a role in this?**” The good news is, one of the benefits of using Commercial Ops is saying that it covers both sales and marketing ops.

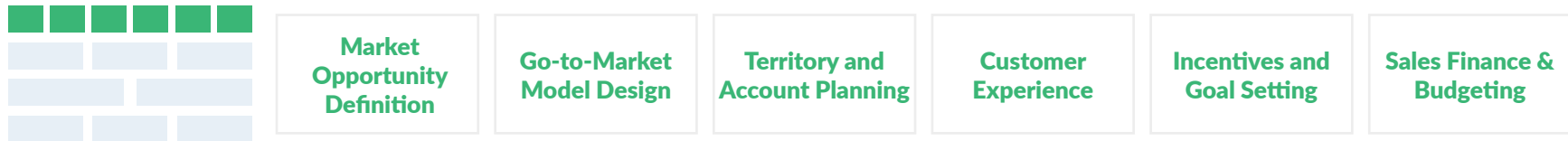
This also includes the data and analytics side. In sales and marketing execution, the insight generation applies to both sales and marketing.

Commercial Operations

Dent introduced us to what he called the **Commercial Ops game board**.



Commercial Operations: Commercial Strategy and Planning



The first row here is commercial strategy and planning. This is about go-to market model design.

Market opportunity definition is foundational to commercial strategy and planning. To determine this, Dent's team used quantitative analytics.

Quantitative analytics is also used to set the **go-to market model design**. If you know that a certain customer, region, or product has a certain type of opportunity, align your sales coverage and capacity to that. Then determine what should be high-touch, low-touch, or no-touch.

Then that feeds into your plan for how you'll pursue growth in a territory or at the account level. This is the third aspect — **territory and account planning**. Here, you ask questions like:

- Who is setting the cadence?
- Who determines what account planning looks like?
- Who is making sure it happens?

Customer experience is also becoming increasingly critical. Most people think this is outside the realm of Sales Ops, which it traditionally is. Yet, customer journey mapping intersects with sales journey mapping. The latter is what Sales Ops needs to do to help the salesperson make the journey easier for the buyer and for them to close the deal easier.

To no one's surprise, **incentives and goal-setting** are critical. This is linking behaviors with compensation plans and making sure that the quota-setting process is sound. It's not just about compensation administration — it's really about the strategy behind the compensation.

Then there's **sales finance and budgeting**, which is making sure that all

Where does Finance fit in?

At most organizations, Finance functions as a cross-functional interlock. They sit alongside Sales Ops or Commercial Ops and work together on forecast and the budget.

In some bigger organizations, there might actually be a Sales Finance function. Dent observed that it usually doesn't live within the commercial team directly, but rather it's a dedicated set of resources.

Commercial Operations: Sales & Marketing Execution



Sales and Marketing Insights

Pipeline and Forecast Support

Pricing and Deal Support

The second row in the Commercial Ops game board is sales and marketing execution. This is the core of the core for Sales Ops, and it includes the following:

Sales and Marketing Insights

Is sales and marketing execution different for each company depending on their size and industry?

Pipeline and Forecast Support

This means supporting the pipeline and the cadence, ensuring that inspection is happening, and making sure that you're calling the numbers as accurately as you can at the end of the month or quarter.

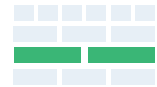
Dent admits that this is a “tricky one” because organizations are fit for purpose. According to him, industry and sales complexity do change the equation.

If your company is largely a very high-volume, transactional sales motion, then you may focus on something different. You may actually focus on getting deals done quickly. Your pricing desk has to be rapidly operating as well.

Pricing and Deal Support

This means supporting active deals through a pricing desk or through ongoing sales support.

On the other hand, if you've got a very complex go-to market motion, then you may be a little more worried about sales enablement. This is especially true if the go-to market motion is a cross-functional buy and it takes a long time. You need to make sure your reps know how to communicate the value proposition of a very



Commercial Operations: Talent and Enablement

Talent Strategy and Recruiting

Sales Enablement and Training

The third row is talent and enablement.

Talent strategy and recruiting are intuitive. You need to determine what the profile or competency model of an effective professional looks like. How are you finding and sourcing those people?

Note that Sales Ops traditionally isn't in charge of talent recruitment, as it's the job of Human Resources. Yet, Dent emphasized the importance of having a connection between the traditional Sales Ops team and the commercial leadership.

Sales enablement and training are particularly critical, according to Dent. You need to provide the right content or collaterals to your sales team and train them accordingly.

How to Manage Your Talent and Sales Enablement

How do you find talent for your Sales Operations or Commercial Operations team?

There are two paths, Dent said. The first one is to go for former sales reps. You need to make sure, though, that Sales Ops motivates and intrigues the person you're tapping. Don't settle for someone who isn't very successful with selling and only wants to take on a different role within the company.

You want someone who's engaged in the topic you're asking them to work on. That's why enablement could be a potential area for sales reps.

The other path is poaching. Go to bigger organizations with bigger Commercial Ops functions and bring in one of their people to take on a leadership role. They can help you build your team, which is the kind of prospect that excites many people.

If your sales reps are resistant to change, what sales enablement tactics should you apply?

Dent shared his own insight as a former sales rep. He advised that you show your sales reps where the money is. Based on his experience, he found himself utilizing the same resources as the people who earned more money than he did doing the same job.

Figure out what will drive winning behavior. Find internal sponsors and champions whom you can build a program with to show results, then sell those results to the rest of the resistant sales organization.



Commercial Operations: Data Infrastructure, Applications, and Insights

Data Infrastructure

Core Commercial Applications

Data Science and Analytics

The fourth row is data infrastructure, applications, and insights.

Data infrastructure refers to the core IT foundation. For this to function well, you need to ask the following questions:

- **Do you have the right** data sources?
- **Do you have the right** collection capabilities?
- **Can you process the data** without a lot of manual manipulation to generate insights that the sales team can actually use?

Then, there are the **core commercial applications**. These include systems like CRM, business intelligence tool, visualization tool, IT solution, and sales engagement platform.

Last, but definitely not the least in this row, are **data science and analytics**. These refer to both good data hygienes and protocols for how you do the math. You should also ask the following questions when it comes to this area:

- **Are you set up** to tackle small, medium, or big data?
- **Can you apply** predictive analytics?
- **Can you apply** machine learning to sales and marketing use cases?

The Biggest Challenges in Sales Ops

There are two big challenges that people face when it comes to Sales Ops.

The first struggle is calling the number. This has to do with committing results or numbers. There are challenges when it comes to being able to confidently relay to the sales or marketing leadership that things are moving towards the desired result.

The struggle in calling the number often manifests when you're planning targets, and then later on in the sales process.

The second challenge is establishing a cadence that's able to predict closing deals. Managers and reps need to have a results pipeline activity type of conversation so they don't have to play detective to figure out whether a deal is likely to close.

In order to do that, they need data. That's where Sales Ops comes into play — its purpose is to provide intelligence about prospects.

Best Practices by Top Companies

To learn about the best practices that top companies use, Dent's team studied hundreds of organizations. They talked to Commercial Ops leaders, Sales Ops leaders, and sales enablement.

They examined the best of the best performers, which they defined as, "companies who had in the past two years grown their share in their market and revenue." Dent's team found that the companies that are winning are really set up to succeed.

They discovered these top companies' four best practices:

- **They are well-resourced.** This is a huge battle as most sales teams are hopelessly stretched.
- **They have a clear mandate.** Their Sales Ops or Commercial Ops teams know their mission — to free up sales reps' selling time and make them more productive.
- **Their quality of talent is higher.** Leaders from their Sales Ops or Commercial Ops function have a connection with the rest of the commercial executives. Also, they employ effective specialists who focus on particular tasks.
- **They have sales leadership engagement.** Their Sales Ops and sales leadership respect and support each other.

Five Areas Where Top Companies Are Better

There are five areas within Commercial Ops where the top companies excel at compared to their peers. Upon studying them, Dent's team discovered that the winners are better at the following:

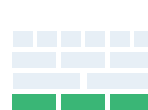
- **Identifying** where the market opportunity is
- **Aligning** sales capacity to the market opportunity
- **Incentives** setting
- **Pipeline** sales cycle support
- **Sales** enablement and training

If these are areas you need to improve on, double down on them because top companies invest on them.

Dent also shared another interesting finding from their study: the winners are better at everything. He said there are times when they find places of parity in their study results where winners and laggards have the same performance.

Yet, they really didn't see that parity across any of the areas they considered for their study.

Data Infrastructure, Applications, and Insights: Part Two



**Data
Infrastructure**

**Core
Commercial
Applications**

**Data
Science &
Analytics**

Going back to data infrastructure, applications, and insights, Dent and his team discovered that companies in general aren't good at these.

About a fifth of companies feel that they really have best in class ability to take data and turn it into insights. This is quite difficult to fix. It often requires some real infrastructural change. It's a problem for most organizations, so you're not alone if you're experiencing this.

Second, companies really struggle with figuring out which sales and marketing applications to deploy. A big part of that is this: there are more than 7,000 different sales and marketing applications people can choose from. That's why it's not surprising that it's very difficult to select the right ones.

Sales Tech Adoption and Utilization

Dent and his team studied different categories of technology to find out which ones Commercial Ops teams are deploying and how well they're utilizing them. The study they conducted covered cross B2B industry, and here's what they learned:

- **Frequently deployed and fluently used:** CRM, business intelligence (BI) tools, configure price quote (CPQ), proposal tools, and sales training platforms
- **Not frequently deployed but fluently used:** Sales resource planning or digital account planning tools
- **Moderately deployed with moderate effectiveness:** Marketing automation, lead and contact intelligence, predictive analytics, and customer success
- **Miscellaneous:** Compensation, talent assessment on a digital scale, territory design or alignment, and sales enablement or sales engagement

Do top companies utilize certain technologies more frequently than others?

Yes.



A lot of these frequently-utilized technologies touch the front line. They free up selling times and drive win rates.

Advanced Analytics in Sales: Key Use Cases Gaining Traction

Advanced analytics has definitely landed in sales and marketing. An increase in computing power, open sources, vendors, and data made advanced analytics something that companies can do without an army of data scientists.

There's a lot of activity in the market around this. There are actually clients and broad companies in the broader market who are effectively deploying these technologies.

Here are the key use cases that are gaining traction:

- **Finding Customers and Prospects** — People are deploying machine learning models to find lookalike customers (those who look like the ones they won in the past).
- **Driving Up-sell, Cross-sell, and Retention** — Cross-sell targeting means developing a cross-sell model to find out what a good client for your company looks like. Someone who buys Product A might also buy Product B.
- **Improving Sales and Marketing Effectiveness** — These improvements come through better scoring of prospects, accounts, and next best actions. You can also look at successful deals, cadences, and touchpoints, and try to get reps to align with those, recommending something specific as a next step.
- **Enriching Core Datasets** — This covers data validation and data enrichment.
- **Improving Forecast Accuracy** — This covers predictive pipeline and deal scoring. You can apply advanced analytics to look at successful deals in the past, to identify what's in and out of pattern, and then provide a more accurate score of whether a deal is likely to close.
- **Optimizing Pricing and Margin** — This means having guided pricing and dynamic pricing.

Advice for Starting Sales Ops Teams

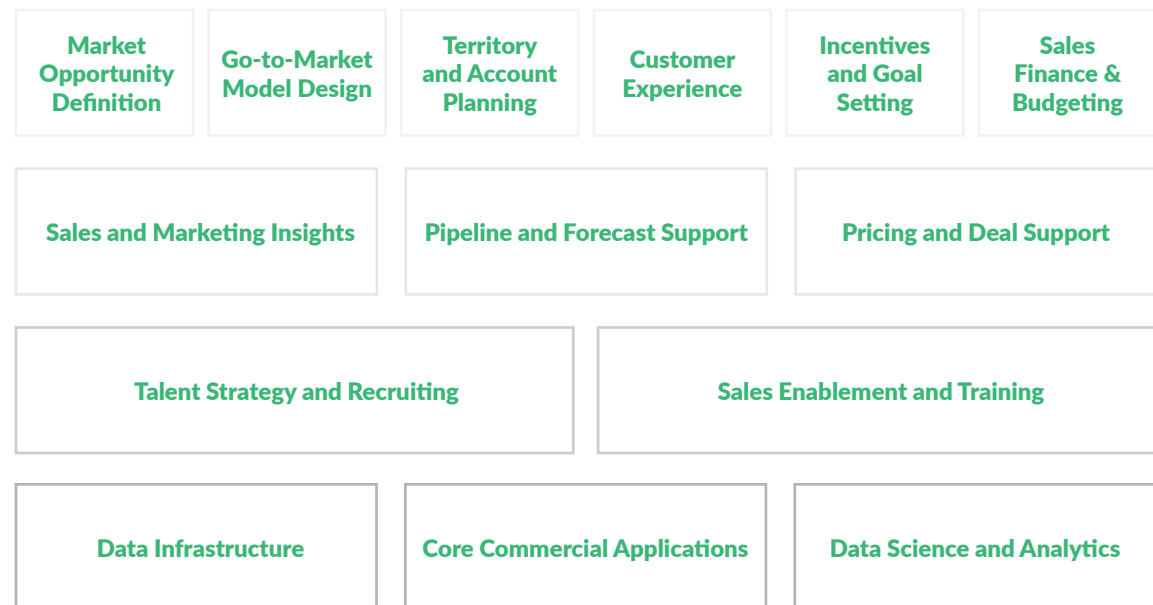
For those building their Sales Ops team, Dent advises to start by going back to what the winners are doing really well. In the planning stages, those are the market opportunity definition and the go-to market model design. In the execution stage, the pipeline and forecast make up the core.

In terms of technologies, Dent recommended that you start with CRM, BI, CPQ, proposal tools, and sales training technology. Those are good ones to start with because they're based on the market data. They are very foundational indeed to being effective.

Conclusion

Along with learning the ins and outs of Commercial Operations, knowing the top companies' best practices is also important to succeed in Sales Ops. Some might say that Sales Ops is dead, but the truth is, it's most certainly thriving.

Always keep in mind the essential purpose and functions of this team. This way, you won't be prone to taking it for granted or disregarding it completely.





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