How to Implement a
WIN/LOSS
Program

BY ZACH GOLDEN

"**WHY DID I LOSE?" IT'S THE FIRST QUESTION A SALESPERSON** wants to ask a prospect after failing to win their business. Unfortunately, the likelihood of getting a straight answer is slim. According to research, prospects share the complete truth only 40 percent of the time in new-business situations. This means that in 60 percent of these situations, sales reps do not have a complete and accurate understanding of why they lost. If sales reps don't know why they won or lost a sale, then the organization's decision-makers and leaders won't know either.

The most efficient and effective solution to this conundrum is to implement win/loss research. A thorough win/loss analysis program will provide optimum sales alignment and support and deliver invaluable prospect feedback to an organization. It will help a sales team understand exactly why they lost and what needs to be done to improve their performance and the company's presentation of its products and services. So, how can an organization get started?

Executive-Level Sponsorship
For a win/loss program to be effective, it must have executive sponsorship. Without the commitment of the president or general manager, it will be difficult to achieve success.

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Win/loss involves—and has an impact on—almost every area of a company. The research will have an impact across sales, marketing, product development, technology, client service, operations, pricing, etc. Therefore, anyone who has direct oversight over any of these areas needs to support the process, starting with executive leadership. Otherwise, nothing will be done with the feedback you gathered.

For example, when a large multinational BPO firm sponsored a win/loss program and rolled out the concept to its sales division, the COO clearly communicated the purpose and intended impact on the kickoff call: *"We need these results in order to be more competitive in the marketplace. Everyone needs to pay attention to the feedback as it comes in and use it to improve how we do business."*

The message was clear and powerful and set a positive tone for the entire program. The company instituted a process where each interview was reviewed by the salesperson and their manager for individual training purposes. In addition, team members from product marketing, competitive intelligence and pricing set monthly calls to review trends.

Commit to the Process
Another important factor for success is to position win/loss as a long-term process, not a one-time occurrence. Some companies believe they can conduct a single study and extract all the value they need. However, to be truly effective, win/loss must be part of a long-term process.

Think of it as you would a wellness program. Getting to a place of personal wellness requires a committed lifestyle. Company health requires a similar effort.

A long-term commitment to win/loss will deliver results. The president of a large financial institution, who credits continuous win/loss research with making him a better leader, said it has "become part of our sales and service culture, and our team relies on the results as part of our drive for continuous improvement." This ability to review and operationalize data over time will enable organizations to commit to and prioritize their overall wellness.

Implement a Win/Loss Program

Launching a successful win/loss analysis program requires implementing seven key steps. You can create and deliver the program internally or hire a third-party research partner. In this example, the upcoming steps assume an internal design, launch and program administration.

1 Identify a Program Coordinator

The first step is to identify who will run the program. Often it will be someone in sales or marketing. This coordinator will be the go-to person, responsible for working directly with internal stakeholders and sales to gather information and finalize research instruments.

The coordinator must be someone who can get things done and have enough authority to ensure that different areas of the company will work together. Because win/loss will not be successful without buy-in from sales, the coordinator must also feel comfortable working with sales reps to collect and extract deal-flow information.

Some companies prefer to assign a coordinator who has more of an administrative background. However, this could backfire if the sales team opts to ignore the efforts of someone less senior. Try to find someone the sales team already knows and respects. This will ensure that sales data is successfully collected.

2 Set Up a Kickoff Meeting

Once the coordinator has been selected, it's time to set up a program kickoff meeting. It is critical that the head of sales attend to ensure they understand exactly what the program entails. Other attendees should include internal stakeholders who will be involved or impacted by the win/loss program.

Ask each stakeholder to share their objectives for the research and then develop a list of questions to use in the interviews. Also, determine the workflow for capturing information from recently closed won or lost deals, and agree on how to share those results throughout the organization.

3 Create and Finalize the Interview Guide

The best interview guides include input from key influencers within the organization and cover the most important stages of the sales cycle.

The first step to explore is the vendor selection process. How did the prospect determine which vendors to evaluate, and what were their initial perceptions of the marketplace? Identify the attributes that were most important at the onset of their search. Also, capture open-ended commentary about your company's strengths and weaknesses and competitor comparisons.

Next, score prospect satisfaction with key sales and product-related attributes, compared with the competition. Finally, conclude by understanding which firm the prospect ultimately selected, the reasons for that choice and why they didn't select a different competitor.

Get input from all areas of the company and be prepared to create several drafts before your questionnaire is fully customized to your company's unique needs. Once key stakeholders have signed off on the interview guide, you're ready to select your interviewers.

> **Debrief on deals against top competitors to gain valuable insights into how rivals position themselves and connect with prospects.**

4 Identify and Train Interviewers

The next step is to select and train people who will conduct the research. Since it's important to capture unbiased, honest feedback from prospects, the sales team should not be involved in conducting these interviews.

Interviewers should be comfortable talking on the phone and able to lead informed, probing conversations. They should also have a strong working knowledge of the company's sales process and product offerings. Offer training to close any knowledge gaps.

In addition, interviewers should be familiar with hot-button issues that will help them focus the conversation. If ample time is committed to becoming familiar with the questions in the interview guide, interviews will run more smoothly and interviewers will sound more professional.

5 Select the Best Deals to Interview

The program coordinator must be able to identify how to acquire and forward the necessary sales information to interviewers. The easiest way to do this is to pull data straight from a CRM database. However, the raw data feed will need thoughtful vetting before it is considered workable.

It's important to avoid cherry-picking, so partner with sales leadership to ensure that specific deals are not deliberately excluded. Remember, the quality of an interview will only be as good as the quality of the contact, so make sure the CRM lists prospect decision-makers and their correct contact information.

Establish a floor for deal size and only request feedback for opportunities above that level. This will filter out the smallest deals, which may not have received the full extent of sales resources to begin with.

If you can debrief on deals against top competitors, you will gain valuable insights into how rivals position themselves and connect with prospects. Also, capture feedback to help coach underperforming sales reps as well as to learn from the top performers.

6 Conduct and Disseminate Interviews

The best time to speak with prospects is approximately two to four weeks after they've made their buying decision. During this period, the details of the buying process will still be fresh in their minds, so you get timely, accurate information.

Once interviews are completed, it is important to share the insights throughout the organization. When you share interviews with key stakeholders, encourage them to share the information with relevant personnel. There is a lot of value in sharing the interviews with others, such as sales managers and individuals involved in the deal.

7 Aggregate Findings and Present to Senior Management

For win/loss to have the most impact, the findings must be aggregated and analyzed. While the verbatim feedback provided in each interview transcript is instrumental in helping individual teams learn from their experiences, the entire company can benefit if it learns from the collective experiences of sales.

Assess your company's overall strengths and weaknesses, and become familiar with what prospects say you do well and what you need to improve. Reinforce data with the open-ended commentary that prospects share during their interviews. In addition, compare qualitative and quantitative ratings to key competitors noted in the interviews. And remember to look at results on a relative basis, monitoring performance and industry trends over time.

To have the most impact, present these results in person to an audience that includes key program stakeholders and senior management.

Conclusion

Win/loss is an excellent management tool for sales alignment. It helps companies gather prospect perceptions and feedback regarding their sales processes, product offerings and overall competitiveness. And it allows leadership teams to engage in debate, strategizing in more healthy, productive ways. While win/loss allows senior management to focus on solving problems, it only works if the company is disciplined and commits to continuous improvement over time. **PM**

About the Author

Zach Golden is a consultant at Anova Consulting Group, where he specializes in managing win/loss research programs for his clients. Zach focuses his work on ensuring each program has strategic and actionable insights to help his clients win more business. Additionally, Zach is heavily involved in business development for Anova, managing the company's branding and marketing efforts. Zach is an alumnus of Babson College, where he graduated cum laude with a B.S. in strategic management. Email Zach at zach@anovaconsulting.com.