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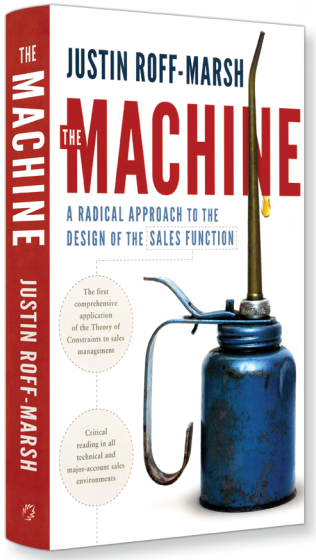
The Machine

A Radical Approach to the Design of the Sales Function



by Justin Roff-Marsh

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In *The Machine*, Justin Roff-Marsh shows readers how to follow the intrepid executives who have implemented his ideas over the last 15 years, building ridiculously efficient sales functions — and market-dominating enterprises — as a consequence.Roff-Marsh calls these executives his silent revolutionaries.

For the last 20 years, organizations' ability to produce has overtaken their ability to sell, and, for at least as long, customers have unfailingly embraced every opportunity to avoid interacting with traditional field salespeople.

Applying the division of labor to sales might not seem controversial, but this innocent-sounding idea decimates the sales management orthodoxy and replaces it with a strange new world where sales is primarily an inside activity, where salespeople earn fixed salaries and focus their attention exclusively on selling conversations, where regional sales offices become redundant, and where marketing and engineering become seamlessly integrated with sales.

The Machine is a field guide for the executive who's prepared to wrestle sales away from autonomous field-based artisans in favor of a tightly synchronized team of specialists. Readers will embrace *The Machine* either to exploit the new sales order or to avoid falling victim to it.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why a centrally coordinated team should be responsible for sales.
- The four key principles for applying the division of labor to sales.
- A model for creating the new sales environment in your organization.
- To generate sales opportunities and manage the sales function.

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: **THE MACHINE**

by Justin Roff-Marsh

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The Machine: A Radical Approach to the Design of the Sales Function by Justin Roff-Marsh. Copyright © 2015 by Justin Roff-Marsh. Summarized by permission of the author, Justin Roff-Marsh; published by Greenleaf Book Group Press. 244 pages, $22.95, ISBN 978-1-6263-4224-8.

Introduction

All is not well in sales. The sales environment in a typical organization — in most every organization, in fact — is seriously dysfunctional. But rather than focusing on the obvious dysfunction, management is busy with incremental improvement initiatives: sales training, sales-force automation (technology of various types) or bolt-on lead-generation activities (e.g., outsourced telemarketing, social media activities). Because none of these initiatives address the root cause of the dysfunction, they amount to nothing more than arranging chairs on the deck of the sinking *Titanic*.

It's not that sales is getting worse: The issue is that the rest of the organization is getting so much better while sales clings to the same structure, the same management approach and the same practices that have been in place for the last 50 years. Why is sales underperforming? One reason is that salespeople aren't selling. Less than 10 percent of a typical salesperson's capacity is allocated to selling. The majority of a salesperson's day is dedicated to customer service and administrative activities, to solution design and proposal generation, and to prospecting and fulfillment-related tasks.

A New Assumption

Sales is typically the sole responsibility of autonomous agents. When we employ salespeople, we advise them that they will be held accountable for outcomes, not activities. We pay them commissions (in part or in full) rather than fixed salaries. And we encourage them, in most cases, to manage their territories, their accounts and their sales opportunities as if they were, well, their own.

The connection between dysfunction and salespeople's autonomy is easy to spot. Salespeople spend so little time selling because they have so many responsibilities competing for their limited time, because each salesperson is a self-contained sales function. Salespeople conflict with management because there is simply no place for management in a typical sales function.

If the assumption that *sales is the sole responsibility of autonomous agents* is the root cause of this dysfunction, it's clearly time for a new assumption. But what should that be?

Sales is the responsibility of a centrally coordinated team. This innocent-looking assumption leads logically to a radical new approach to the design and management of the sales function.

Under this new approach, sales becomes the consequence of a number of interrelated processes — rather than the output of a person. Salespeople become a component in a much larger machine (albeit an important component!). And management assumes total responsibility for the design and day-to-day performance of the sales function (managers own sales targets, and they cannot delegate them away).

PART I: THE CASE FOR CHANGE AND A NEW MODEL

Four Key Principles

Let's consider how we might go about causing a dramatic increase in the productivity of the sales function. What might be the *direction* of the solution?

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For inspiration, we look to manufacturing because we know that this is one part of the organization that *has* seen a dramatic increase in productivity in recent times.

In 1776, in his magnum opus, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith predicted that the division of labor would drive a massive increase in productivity. He told the story of a pin-manufacturing operation in which 10 workers had divided the production procedure into 18 distinct steps and then distributed these steps among themselves. Individually, each worker could produce 20 pins a day. Collectively, they were producing 48,000!

If we take a stroll around a typical organization, we discover the division of labor in all types of production environments, in engineering and even in finance. In fact, the only part of the organization that has not embraced the division of labor is sales! Let's assume that this is the direction of our solution.

Putting the Division of Labor to Work

The lessons from manufacturing can be generalized into four fundamental principles.

Principle 1: Scheduling Should Be Centralized. The division of labor will result in synchronization problems. The solution is to centralize scheduling.

Any work you perform can be broken into two components. The first of these are the critical activities that cause matter (or information) to change form. The second component is what is referred to as *scheduling* — the sequencing and timing of those activities. As you add more workers to the work environment, scheduling rapidly becomes more complex.

The key to avoiding synchronization problems when we apply the division of labor is to first split the responsibility for these two components of work. If we fail to do this, the local efficiency improvements that result from workers focusing on a single task will quickly be eaten up by the general chaos that spreads through the environment.

There are many environments in which the centralization of scheduling is a well-established practice, including the project environment (in which the project manager owns the schedule) and the airport (where an air-traffic controller determines who takes off and lands). In each of these cases, scheduling is a specialty. If we are entertaining the idea of applying division of labor to sales, we must first acknowledge that the very first activity for which the salesperson relinquishes responsibility will be scheduling.

Principle 2: Workflows Should Be Standardized. The division of labor changes things: Standardization suddenly becomes critical. When the person who plans the work (the scheduler) is remote from the people who do the work, the standardization of procedures (and workflows) prevents the complexity of environments from multiplying to unmanageable levels.

In manufacturing environments, the workflow is referred to as the *routing*. The routing is the path that work will follow through the plant, taking into account both the activities that will be performed and the resources that will perform them. The general rule in manufacturing is that for production of the same product, the same routing should be followed. For the sales environment to be manageable and scalable, all opportunities of the same type (i.e., the same objective) must be prosecuted using the same routing — from the origination of those opportunities through their management.

Principle 3: Resources Should Be Specialized. Specialization causes a significant increase in workers' productivity for two reasons: First, when a worker performs activities of just one type, they become very good at performing those activities. Second, switching between materially different activities imposes a significant overhead on a worker. The elimination of this switching (multitasking) increases that worker's effective capacity. When it comes to dividing activities, it tends to make sense to make divisions along three axes:

1. Location. You should split field and inside activities.
2. Work type. You should split activities that are different enough to impose a switching cost.
3. Cadence. You should split long and short lead-time activities.

Principle 4: Management Should Be Formalized. Specialization is a two-edged sword. It causes a dramatic increase in the productivity of each individual, but it also causes each worker to operate in a vacuum — intently focused on their own work in progress (their task list). To a great extent, the scheduler compensates for this narrow focus, but the manager is still required to ensure compliance with the schedule, to resolve problems as they occur and to make decisions relating to the design and resourcing of the overall environment.

Reimagining the Sales Function

Our first principle dictates that, as we push toward the division of labor, our very first specialist must be a scheduler, a *business-development coordinator* (BDC). Our salesperson will be called a *business-development manager* (BDM), to highlight their new focus. It's important to note that

the BDC is not a sales assistant. The word assistant would imply that it's the BDM who allocates work. The opposite is the case. The BDC pushes work to the BDM.

This means that the BDM must transfer any and all scheduling responsibilities to the BDC. This may be a more significant undertaking than it sounds when you consider that, in most cases, the BDM's scheduling responsibilities are not limited to the management of their own calendar. In most cases, salespeople are interfacing with production and customer service, coordinating the delivery of clients' jobs.

We can draw four very general conclusions:

- Our BDC must perform all scheduling.
- Our BDM will spend more time selling.
- Our BDM should work in the field (not in an office).
- Our BDC should work from the head office (ideally not a regional office).

Our second principle dictates that we use a standard sequence of activities to originate opportunities (i.e., to identify or generate sales opportunities) and to prosecute opportunities (i.e., to pursue them to their ultimate conclusion — either a win or a loss).

The real value of standardization is that it enables handoffs between stakeholders in both the sales environment and the associated functions. If an opportunity is being prosecuted according to a pre-existing workflow, after each field activity the BDM needs only to update their BDC with one of four possible next steps. They will recommend abandoning the opportunity, repeating the activity just performed, scheduling the next activity in sequence or scheduling an activity further downstream in the workflow. This structure enables a lot of information to be transferred in just a few words.

In designing a workflow, we're not trying to map the existing complexity; rather, we're *engineering it out* of the sales environment (at least to the degree that it's realistic to do so).

If we adopt project management terminology, we now have a project plan (our standard workflow for originating and prosecuting sales opportunities), a project manager (our BDC) and a resource pool containing a single resource (our BDM). To exploit the benefits of the division of labor, it's now necessary to add some more people to our resource pool.

Promotion. In practice, the requirement for tight integration between promotion and sales is so strong that the responsibility for the former cannot possibly be delegated (at least in full) to another department. The practical solution is to add a *campaign coordinator* to sales.

The campaign coordinator's reason for existence is very simple: to maintain a queue with an optimal number of sales opportunities upstream from the BDC. This ensures that the BDC always has someone to call when an empty slot appears in the BDM's calendar.

Technical tasks. Every engineer-to-order environment has the same problem. Salespeople become entangled in the delivery of the solutions they sell — and this entanglement cannibalizes their selling capacity (and generates a host of other problems). An alternative approach is to add a third party to the mix, a person we'll call a *project leader*. The project leader and the BDM work side by side for most of the opportunity-prosecution workflow. At the point at which the client wishes to discuss (in concrete terms) their requirements, the BDM introduces the project leader. After the sale, the project leader champions the project as it moves through production. This means that the project leader replaces the BDM as the primary point of contact for both production and the client.

Semitechnical tasks. Semitechnical activities include the generation of standard proposals, the processing of repeat transactions and the provision of after-sales support (e.g., issue resolution). All these activities — as well as any others that are semitechnical in nature — should be allocated to the customer-service team.

The customer-service team must develop both the capability and the capacity to take full ownership of the entire customer-service caseload, and salespeople must extricate themselves from customer service.

In order to prosecute each sales opportunity, the BDC will break the opportunity into a series of activities and allocate each activity to one or more of these resources, in accordance with the routing specified in the opportunity-prosecution workflow.

The downside of the division of labor is that it causes environments to become fragile. Although it's the responsibility of the BDC to synchronize the various team members, management oversight is critical.

The Death of Field Sales

The fact is, sales today is an inside endeavor, supported, in some cases, with discrete field activities. There are still some markets in which sales is essentially an outside activity — think Snap-on tools, whose operators pilot their trucks directly to workshops and building sites and sell on the spot. But these markets are the exception, not the rule.

The Inside-Out Approach

Where planning is concerned, what's required is an inside-out approach. Start with an inside sales function and then add field resources as they are required — and only to the extent that they are required.

The inside-out approach starts with attention to the type of transactions that make up the lion's share of a typical organization's revenue. These are simple — and typically repetitive — transactions. Customer service should handle these simple transactions, and should generate quotations and handle customer issues.

Our inside sales team actually consists of two roles. We have the inside salespeople, who perform nothing other than what we call meaningful selling interactions. These interactions include phone conversations, email communication and even instant messaging.

We also have a campaign coordinator, who is responsible for generating all of the outbound sales opportunities that keep the inside sales team members so busy.

A field specialist is a person who supports inside sales by performing discrete field activities. Their typical activities would include on-site requirement discovery and product demonstrations.

Your inside sales team members are not telemarketers (in the traditional sense of the word). They are true salespeople — equivalent in every sense to the type of person you would otherwise have in the field. They are knowledgeable, ambitious and engaging. And they are paid roughly what they would expect to earn if they were field salespeople. And, importantly, your inside sales team members are not second-class salespeople relative to your field specialists.

Your inside sales team, if your organization is typical, is your primary sales team, and it's vital that this is reflected in your cultural norms.

The Machine Within the Machine

In most discussions of sales, the greater organization doesn't rate a mention. The fact that we traditionally consider the sales function in isolation is likely to be an admission of a fundamental flaw in the design of sales — as well as the cause of many of the problems we experience.

Let's discuss a model for the organization as a whole and expose the critical connections between sales and the other key organizational functions.

The Theory of Constraints: A Crash Course

The theory of constraints (TOC) recognizes that the output of any system is determined by the system's lowest-capacity resource and that this resource (the constraint) can be used to gather intelligence about — and exercise control over — the system as a whole.

Let's consider a very simple business, consisting of just sales and production functions. In order to make money, the business must generate a gross profit (or, technically, a contribution margin) at a faster rate than it incurs operating expenses. Units of gross profit must be processed by both sales and production before they can be banked. Specifically, sales must win an order, and then production must fulfill it.

We will use the term *throughput* to refer to units of gross profit. Technically, throughput is equal to the revenue generated by a transaction minus the totally variable costs associated with that transaction (e.g., raw material costs, sales commissions, shipping).

Because the amount of money that a business makes is a function of the rate at which it processes throughput, it is important that we understand the capacity of the business. In other words, we need to know how much throughput the business can process in a given period.

The capacity of the business as a whole is determined by the capacity of its lowest-capacity function — what we'll call the constraint. So, if the capacity of sales is $T10,000/day and production is $T18,000/day, this business can generate only $T10,000 a day ($T is throughput dollars). Production has the capacity to produce more, but without orders to fulfill, there's no point in attempting to do so.

Because (in this scenario) sales determines the profitability of the organization as a whole, we can draw some conclusions about how sales and production should work together. Sales should sell as much as possible. Production should produce whatever has been sold by the sales team and nothing more.

We can now generalize from these conclusions and arrive at two simple rules applicable to every business:

- The constraint should operate at full capacity at all times;
- Nonconstraints should subordinate to the constraint.

If we reverse the capacities of the functions in our simple business, production becomes the constraint, and sales should subordinate to it. This (typically more desirable) scenario leads to the conclusion that sales should sell only what production has the capacity to produce, and production should operate at full capacity at all times.

We must acknowledge that, in reality, the output of any resource is inherently variable. The solution to this problem requires that sales maintain a buffer of orders

upstream from production, large enough to absorb the sales function's inherent variability — but no larger.

The existence of the buffer enables the organization to fully exploit its production capacity as well as to maintain good on-time delivery performance. Sales should maintain the constraint buffer at its optimal size, and production should operate at full capacity at all times.

PART II: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Formulating a Plan

You need a model for your new environment, and you need a rough understanding of the resourcing and cost implications of your model. The best way to arrive at a model is to start inside and work outward. (For this discussion, we'll assume you're adopting the inside-out model.)

Customer service. Start with a blank sheet of paper and add a number of circles to represent your customer-service team. You need to forget about your existing team members for the moment. You should add enough customer-service representatives to cope with your existing volume of orders, quote requests and issues — even if your salespeople are currently responsible for some (or all) of these activities. You should also ensure that your customer-service team is large enough to provide you with sufficient protective capacity.

Inside sales and campaign coordination. It's time to add some more circles now to represent your inside sales team, and if you have an inside sales team (or a sales team of any type, for that matter) you'll need sales opportunities. Opportunities come from campaigns of various kinds, so that means you need a campaign coordinator too.

To determine how many inside salespeople you need, calculate how many meaningful selling interactions your entire existing sales team has in an average day. Multiply that by four, because quadrupling your daily selling interactions will be easily achievable with specialization. Then divide the result by 30, which is the number of meaningful selling interactions that a dedicated inside salesperson should average. This is the number of inside salespeople you should start with, unless it is less than two — in which case you should have two inside salespeople.

Field specialists. If you do need people in the field, you now need to carefully consider the nature and volume of activities these people will be performing. For the nature of these activities, you can divide field visits into three categories: purely technical visits or technical sales visits, transactional sales and enterprise sales. To calculate how many circles you need to represent your field specialists, determine the average number of daily field meetings your team performs that are genuinely required and that fit into those first two categories; then divide that number by four, the daily capacity of a field specialist. The crucial point here is not the number of field representatives you employ; it's how much time they spend face to face with customers.

Business development. Most organizations have a requirement for some field-based, business-development activities: running solution-design workshops, presenting to groups of decision makers. You first need to determine how many enterprise field activities you perform today across your team as a whole. Then you can double that number and divide the result by 20. That will tell you the number of business-development managers (BDMs) you need and the number of business-development coordinators (BDCs) you need to pair them with. Here, we're planning to double your existing volume of business-development activity. It's reasonable to expect that this additional volume will be a natural consequence of your additional inside sales activity.

Project leaders. Project leaders prevent BDMs from becoming entangled in projects in some technical and most engineer-to-order environments. You need more project leaders than BDMs. If you genuinely need project leaders, you'll certainly need between two and four for each of your BDMs.

The economics. To confirm that your proposed model makes economic sense, you should confirm that your proposed model meets these two conditions:

- The model, when it is implemented, must result in a significant increase in sales activity (meaningful selling interactions).
- The model, when it is implemented, cannot cause an immediate increase in your organization's operating expenses.

The Transition: The Sequence Is Everything

Where planning your transition is concerned, the sequence is everything. The key is to start at the factory door and work outward toward the field — not to start with field representatives or promotional initiatives. If you don't have a factory, the principle is the same: Start as close to production as possible.

This means that you start your transition by fortifying customer service — and engineering if you're an engineer-to-order environment. There are two reasons: You need a lot of additional capacity in customer service to cope with an increase in sales activity and to enable

salespeople to offload the customer-service tasks they are currently performing.

Where you finish your transition is also important. Specifically, you should postpone making changes to your field salespeople until you absolutely have to, and when you do make changes, you should ensure that these changes are driven by the results you are generating with your internal activities. The point is that you should ask salespeople to maintain their existing modus operandi until your success with the internal components of the model forces field changes on you.

How to Convert Opportunities Into Sales

A sales opportunity is a potential deal that a salesperson is working on or a potential deal that has been queued for a salesperson to work on within the current period. We've done away with the requirement for *qualification*. In the inside-out model, a potential deal is either in the salesperson's opportunity queue, or it isn't. If a salesperson has an unutilized unit of capacity and there's a potential deal in the queue, that salesperson should be selling, not qualifying.

Now that we agree on what sales opportunities are, we can discuss how to prosecute them — how to convert a percentage of them into sales.

A workflow is the sequence of steps that need to be performed in order to convert a potential customer into an actual one. The most important steps tend to involve asking the prospect for an intermediate commitment of some kind (e.g., a Web conference to present a proposal). This exposes a central truth: We convince the prospect to make big commitments (purchases) by encouraging them to make a sequence of smaller commitments.

One Workflow

You should have only one workflow for each product or service. In fact, similar products share the same workflow.

Standardization means that the path each opportunity follows through your organization is essentially the same as the path followed by the opportunity before it. There is certainly no reason for variation between salespeople, and even where customers are concerned, it is usually preferable to adopt a standard workflow, for two reasons: First, in a mature market, competitive pressures will cause your customers to structure their businesses similarly and to adopt similar procurement procedures; and second, in an immature market, customers will not have developed fixed procurement procedures — meaning that your salespeople have the opportunity to convince them to purchase via whatever sequence of steps you believe is optimal for both parties.

The Solution-Design Workshop

A solution-design workshop is an invaluable addition to your opportunity-management workflow whenever you are selling a custom-engineered product or service. Such a workshop — often called a *feasibility study* or an *envisioning workshop* — provides the following benefits: It enables you to take control of your client's decision-making processes, which, absent your involvement, is often entirely unstructured and ineffective. It turns solution design into a collaborative process, which results in potential clients assuming ownership of the solution long before they are asked to purchase, and slashes the duration of the solution-design process. And it enables you to socialize the new direction with a larger number of stakeholders (on the client side) than would otherwise be possible.

You should design your workshop so that the greater proportion of the content that will ultimately populate your outcomes document (and the accompanying proposal) is actually generated during the workshop. After the workshop, the project leader should convert the outcomes into a formal presentation-of-findings document and review this document with the salesperson prior to the scheduled presentation-of-findings meeting.

How to Generate Sales Opportunities

The general assumption is that promotion (or prospecting, as salespeople like to call it) is just part of selling. In the inside-out model, this responsibility is taken away from salespeople and transferred inside, leaving management no choice but to confront the promotional challenge head on. If your organization is typical, it will be possible for you to make the transition to the inside-out model and to generate a meaningful increase in sales performance with only minimal promotional effort.

Promotion is the process of identifying prospects and allocating them to salespeople. A prospect is either an individual or an organization that has a nonzero likelihood of purchasing within a reasonable time horizon. A prospect can be either an existing customer or a potential customer.

Unlike salespeople, marketing communicates with prospects in batches, or cohorts. We use the word campaign to refer to both the communication and the cohort of prospects who are being communicated with. The

campaign coordinator is responsible for running the sets of (often) daily campaigns required to maintain salespeople's opportunity queues at their optimal sizes.

All promotional campaigns have three fundamental ingredients:

- An offer, the basic proposition the campaign presents.
- An audience, the set of individuals to which the campaign is targeted.
- Communication, how the offer is communicated — the creative execution.

If we imagine that we are attempting to generate opportunities for the sale of enterprise software, a single campaign might consist of the following steps: (a) a pay-per-click advertisement, encouraging viewers to view a video detailing enterprise software horror stories, which directs the viewers to (b) a landing (or squeeze) page, containing the video and a pitch for the visitors to request a software buyers' guide, the dispatch of which will be followed by (c) an email campaign directed to readers of the buyers' guide, inviting them to attend a webinar, and then, finally, the webinar itself, designed to upsell to a business-process-modeling workshop.

Managing the Sales Function

The inside-out model is structurally different from the traditional one — and this tends to have quite an impact on management requirements. The transition to the inside-out model will tend to result in a requirement for line management that didn't previously exist; a requirement for fewer functional managers (with all sales activities centrally scheduled, silos cease to exist); and a significant increase in the scope of functional management or the emergence of a requirement for executive management (the head of sales is now managing a more complex machine).

How to Manage Sales

In the inside-out model, because sales is now a team sport, it is no longer possible for salespeople to single-handedly generate sales — any more than it is possible for a single football player to win a game. This means that management, rather than salespeople, must own the responsibility for sales outcomes, and management must be responsible for both the overall design and the day-to-day supervision of each of the components of the sales machine.

We looked at how most modern organizations benefit from the system constraint being maintained (by sales) upstream from either production (make to order) or engineering (engineer to order). In these circumstances, the goal of sales should not be to sell as much as possible! The goal should be to maintain the size of the order book within an acceptable range. Sales management must know exactly the number of days' worth of work (and the mix of work) that should be maintained in this buffer, and, of course, the sales machine must be engineered with these requirements in mind.

In addition to the goal, sales management must have an explicit understanding of the necessary conditions that must be maintained in order for the achievement of the goal to be valid. For example, sales management needs to know the allowable acquisition cost — the maximum that can be spent on promotion in order to win a new account.

Line Management: Managing Salespeople

Let's talk about how to actually manage salespeople. Here is a three-step formula: conviction, activity and deals.

Your sales manager must start with the conviction that your offering is salable and that it can reasonably be sold by your sales team — the kind of quiet conviction that comes from certainty.

Activity — meaningful selling conversations — is the primary driver of sales. Activity alone doesn't guarantee you sales, but an absence of activity is a guarantee of an absence of sales. For this reason, the sales manager should treat activity as a necessary condition. Each salesperson must perform a fixed volume of sales activity, day in and day out.

If your salespeople have conviction — and if activity levels are consistently high — deals will flow.

Commit Absolutely

If you are going to make the kind of fundamental changes that are required to implement sales process engineering (SPE), you should only proceed if you are prepared to commit (absolutely) to the future state. If you are not fully committed, wait until you are.

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Machine*, you'll also like:

1. ***The Innovative Sale*** **by Mark Donnolo**. Donnolo's guide will help you incorporate creativity into your sales practices and better understand your customers.

2. ***The Challenger Sale*** **by Brent Adamson, Matthew Dixon**. Every sales rep in the world falls into one of five distinct profiles, but only one — the Challenger — delivers consistently high performance.

3. ***B2B Street Fighting*** **by Brian Dietmeyer**. Change the negotiation conversation from the price of your products and services to the value of your solutions.