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Sales Qualification: The Standard That Separates Pipeline From Forecast

Sales qualification is the process of deciding whether a prospect is worth pursuing, and if so, how to pursue them.

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Key Points

- Sales qualification is a standard, not a conversation. A set of things that must be confirmed through buyer evidence before a deal earns a stage, a close date, and a forecast position.
- Qualification fails differently at different stages of growth. In founder-led teams, it doesn't exist as a standard. In more mature teams, it exists on paper but doesn't show up in live deals.
- Poor qualification inflates pipeline coverage, distorts the forecast, and makes it impossible to coach the team against a shared standard.
- MEDDPICC gives a team eight dimensions to confirm: Metrics, Economic Buyer, Decision Criteria, Decision Process, Paper Process, Identify Pain, Champion, Competition. Each requires buyer evidence, not seller notes.
- A qualification standard only works when it's embedded in the CRM, inspected every week in deal reviews, and used to exit stages as well as enter them.
- The test is simple: in any live deal, can the seller state, not infer, who the economic buyer is, what the buyer has done in the last two weeks, and what the agreed next step is?

What is sales qualification?

Sales qualification is the process of deciding whether a prospect is worth pursuing, and if so, how to pursue them. Done well, it's the difference between a pipeline that is full and a pipeline that converts. Done poorly, it's the reason a team can be busy every day and still miss the number.

Most B2B teams have some version of qualification. They ask about budget. They check for a decision-maker. They run a demo and wait to see if there is interest. But that isn't qualification. That is conversation. Qualification is a standard: a set of specific things that must be confirmed before a deal earns a stage, a close date, and a place in the forecast.

Without that standard, the pipeline fills with deals that feel promising and don't close. The forecast becomes optimistic by default. And the team works hard on the wrong things.

Why qualification fails in most B2B teams

The failure shows up differently depending on where the business is.

In founder-led teams at £1-3M ARR, qualification usually doesn't exist as a formal standard at all. The founder qualifies with instinct. They have spoken to enough buyers to know which conversations are going somewhere and which aren't. The problem is that instinct doesn't transfer. When the first seller joins, they have no template for what a qualified opportunity looks like. They pursue everything. The pipeline grows. The win rate falls.

In teams at £5-20M ARR with a functioning sales motion, the failure looks different. Qualification criteria exist on paper: stages have names, there is a CRM, the team knows what MEDDPICC stands for. But when you look at live deals, the evidence isn't there. Close dates are set based on seller preference. The economic buyer hasn't been identified. The champion hasn't done anything that would confirm they are actually advocating. The forecast is built on stage names rather than buyer actions.

In both cases the root cause is the same: qualification is a concept the team understands but not a standard the team runs against in live deals every week.

What poor qualification actually costs

Wasted time on deals that don't close is a real and significant cost. The deeper cost is what it does to the whole system.

When unqualified deals sit in the pipeline, they inflate coverage ratios. The team looks like it has enough to hit the number. It doesn't. By the time that becomes clear, usually in the last three weeks of the quarter, there is nothing to do about it.

When deals progress without buyer evidence, the forecast is built on seller confidence rather than buyer commitment. The board hears a number that bears no relationship to what is actually happening in the pipeline. Trust erodes. The forecast call becomes a negotiation rather than an inspection.

When the first AE has no qualification standard to work against, every deal looks like an opportunity until it obviously isn't. They spend time on the wrong prospects, they create the wrong expectations internally, and they're impossible to coach because no one can point to a shared definition of what good looks like.

Good qualification fixes all of this before it happens.

MEDDPICC: what it is and how to use it

MEDDPICC is a qualification framework that gives a sales team eight specific dimensions to evaluate on every deal. It isn't a script. It's a lens. Each letter represents something the seller needs to confirm through buyer evidence, not conversation.

Metrics. The quantified value the buyer expects from solving the problem. Cost saved, revenue generated, time recovered, risk reduced. Without metrics, there is no commercial case and no urgency. If the buyer can't put a number on what they are trying to change, the deal has no financial floor.

Economic Buyer. The person with budget authority and the power to say yes without needing approval from anyone at the same level. Most deals stall because the seller has a good relationship with a sponsor or a project lead but has never spoken to the person who actually controls the decision. The economic buyer isn't always the most senior person. It's whoever owns the budget.

Decision Criteria. The specific standards the buyer uses to evaluate options. What matters to them, in order. Knowing this early lets the seller influence the criteria before they are locked. Finding out after the proposal has been sent is too late.

Decision Process. The sequence of steps the buyer follows to reach a decision. Who else is involved. What approvals are required. What the internal timeline looks like. Surprises in this process, an additional sign-off, a procurement gate, a legal review that wasn't mentioned, are the most common reason close dates move.

Paper Process. The legal, security, and procurement review required after commercial agreement. Understanding this before the deal reaches that stage prevents the last-mile slippage that drags closings past quarter end. Ask early. Most buyers know the answer.

Identify Pain. The specific business problem that is driving the initiative. Pain that is tied to a named executive and quantified in commercial terms is far more compelling than a vague improvement goal. The question isn't whether there is a problem. It's whether the problem is urgent enough, owned by

someone senior enough, and costly enough to get the business to act now.

Champion. An internal advocate with influence who is actively selling on the team's behalf when they aren't in the room. Not a friendly contact. Not someone who returns calls quickly. A champion puts their reputation on the line. They make internal presentations, handle objections from colleagues, and pull the deal forward when it stalls. Testing for this is simple: when the champion commits to an internal action, do they follow up?

Competition. The alternatives the buyer is evaluating, including the option of doing nothing. A deal that has no competition is a deal that hasn't been properly qualified. It means the seller doesn't know the full picture. Understanding the competition lets the team position correctly and anticipate the objections that will come.

How to build a qualification standard the team will actually use

The mistake most teams make is treating MEDDPICC as training rather than infrastructure. They run a workshop, update the CRM field names, and expect the behaviour to change. It doesn't.

A qualification standard becomes operational when three things are true.

It's embedded in the CRM. Each MEDDPICC dimension has a corresponding field. Stage progression requires those fields to be populated with buyer evidence, not seller notes. A deal can't move from Stage 2 to Stage 3 unless the economic buyer has been identified and a concrete next step with them has been agreed. That isn't a formality. It's the evidence that the deal has actually moved.

It's inspected every week. The qualification standard only works if managers look at it in live deals and ask the right questions. Not "what is the close date?" but "what has the buyer done that tells us this is still real?" Not "what did the demo go like?" but "who has confirmed the pain and at what level?" The questions change the behaviour. The behaviour changes the data. The data changes the forecast.

It's used to exit as well as enter. Stage exit criteria are more important than stage entry criteria. A deal that can't confirm a champion, can't identify the economic buyer, and has no agreed next step shouldn't be in Stage 3 regardless of how much time the seller has invested. Moving it back isn't a punishment. It's accuracy. And accuracy is what the forecast is built on.

What buyer evidence looks like in practice

Qualification is about what the buyer has done.

A buyer who says "we are definitely interested" isn't the same as a buyer who has agreed to bring their CFO into a business case conversation. A buyer who says "the budget is there" isn't the same as a buyer who has confirmed the approval path and the expected timeline. A buyer who has

attended three demos isn't the same as a buyer who has introduced their legal team and asked for a draft agreement.

The standard is: what has the buyer committed to, and have they followed through on it? A champion who agrees to arrange an internal meeting and then doesn't is a signal. A deal where the economic buyer hasn't responded to any direct outreach is a signal. A late-stage deal where the paper process is still "to be confirmed" is a signal.

Good qualification captures these signals early enough to act on them. Poor qualification treats them as normal and adjusts the close date instead.

Common qualification mistakes

Treating interest as qualification. The buyer took the demo. They asked good questions. They said "send me a proposal." None of that is qualification. Interest means they aren't actively hostile. It doesn't mean they have budget, authority, urgency, or the internal support to get a deal done.

Qualifying once and not again. Qualification isn't an event that happens in the first call. It's an ongoing process. A deal that was genuinely qualified at Stage 2 may have stalled by Stage 3 because the economic buyer changed, the budget moved to a different priority, or the internal champion lost their role. Deals that aren't re-qualified at each stage reflect history, not reality.

Confusing activity with evidence. The seller has sent four emails. They have had two follow-up calls. They have shared a case study. None of that is buyer evidence. Buyer evidence is what the buyer has done: confirmed a meeting, made an introduction, shared internal documents, agreed to a next step and followed through on it.

Skipping the economic buyer because it feels uncomfortable. The most common skip in the whole framework. Getting access to the economic buyer feels presumptuous. Asking for a meeting with someone two levels up feels like overstepping. It isn't. Without that access, the deal can't close. The question is only whether the team discovers that at Stage 2 or Stage 4.

How to tell whether your qualification is actually working

The question isn't whether the team can describe the qualification framework. It's whether the framework shows up in how deals are run.

Look at three or four deals in the pipeline right now. For each one, ask: who is the economic buyer and have they been directly engaged? What has the buyer done in the last two weeks that confirms they are still active? What is the agreed next step and when does it happen? If the answers require the seller to interpret or infer rather than state a fact, the qualification standard isn't operational.

Look at the win rate by stage. If deals are regularly making it to Stage 3 or 4 and then being lost or going dark, the problem is almost always upstream. Deals are entering later stages without the buyer evidence that would confirm they are genuinely advanced. The stage labels are moving. The deal isn't.

Look at what gets discussed in the pipeline review. If the conversation is about activity, calls made, emails sent, meetings booked, the qualification standard isn't what is driving the review. If the conversation is about buyer evidence, what the buyer has confirmed, what stage exit criteria have been met, what the champion has actually done, the standard is starting to work.

Related terms

- AE (Account Executive): The quota-carrying sales rep responsible for closing new business.
- Stage Exit Criteria: The conditions that must be satisfied before a deal advances to the next stage.
- Sales Qualification: The process of determining whether a prospect is worth pursuing.
- Economic Buyer: The person with budget authority and final sign-off power in a deal.
- Buyer Evidence: Proof points and documentation that validate a buyer's decision to purchase.
- Forecast Call: A regular meeting where sales leaders review deal status and revenue projections.
- Business Case: The documented justification for a purchase, including ROI and strategic rationale.
- Buying Group: The set of individuals who collectively influence or make a purchase decision.

Related service: MEDDPICC training
Source: https://www.closingfoundry.com/insights/sales-qualification