Three Business Challenges That Prompted One CEO to Take Action

My name is Larry Caretsky and I am the president of Commence Corporation. For several years I struggled like many executives with the inability to get access to vital customer information when I needed it most. It was either in some file cabinet, our accounting system, an individual contact manager or in the head of one of our account managers who was traveling around the country.

The firm I worked for at the time had a large customer base and many strategic alliances, so when an inquiry came across my desk, I didn't know if it was a customer, a partner, a prospect or someone simply trying to sell me something. The inability to get access to customer information became so frustrating that I decided to do something about it, and what started out as a small project at my old firm has now become the core component of the business in my current role at Commence Corporation.

The First Challenge: Data Consolidation

Every day, vital customer information was streaming into our business via the telephone, fax, email or the web. What happened to this information was a challenge for our business and may be for yours as well. Some of the information was captured and entered into an automated system, but more often than not, too much of it simply fell through the cracks. As a result, if a customer called we had no idea what they had purchased or if they were satisfied with our product and service.

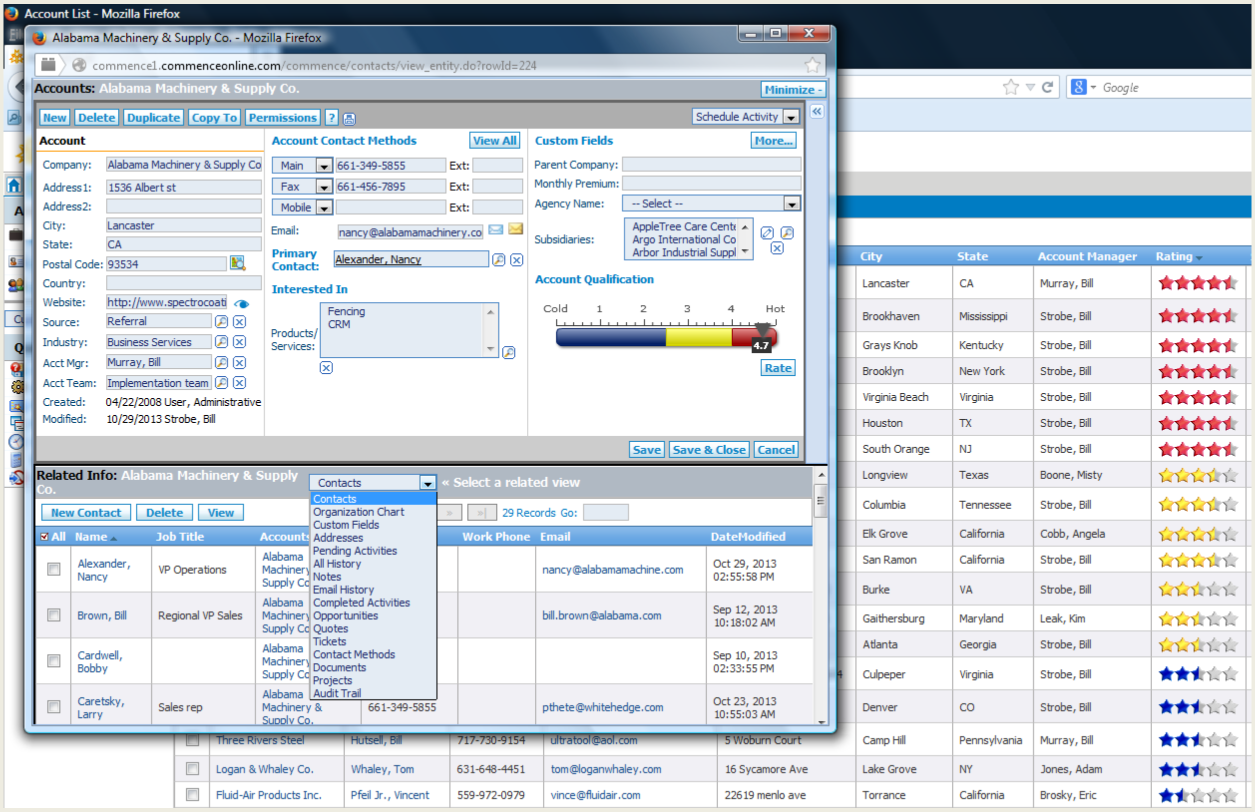
In order to address this I knew we needed to create a single consolidated database that would enable our business to capture, track, manage and share customer information with the people and departments that needed it to efficiently do their jobs. So when I took the helm of Commence Corporation that is exactly what we built.

We also wanted to make sure that any authorized employee could get immediate access to prospect and customer information anytime and anywhere and from any device – PC, Mac, tablet or smartphone. We knew that providing immediate access to this information would enable our sales and service personnel to quickly respond to customer inquiries, which would give us a leg up on the competition and improve the quality of service we could provide to our customers.

What we created is different from competitive solutions. It is cloud-based and uses industry standard components similar to enterprise companies, Microsoft and Salesforce.com, but we focused on the end user experience, making sure the product would be easy to use and would provide people with access to a complete 360 degree profile of customer information all on a single screen. We eliminated the problem of scrolling up and down the page or flipping back and forth from screen to screen to view customer information that we had seen in other products. This just seemed cumbersome and harder to use than necessary.

The screen shot below illustrates the detail of a specific customer selected from the customer list shown behind it. This screen displays a complete 360 degree profile of customer information all on one page. Selecting any one of the choices from the drop down box in the lower half of the screen such as notes, documents, activities or e-mail history for example will immediately display that information on the screen. As a result, you have the complete customer profile right in front of you. This has shown to significantly improved employee efficiency, productivity and customer service.

Customer Detail – Displays complete Customer Profile on One Page



When looking at competitive CRM solutions we also discovered that there were a few key features missing that we knew would provide substantial value to the end users of any business including ours, so we created them.

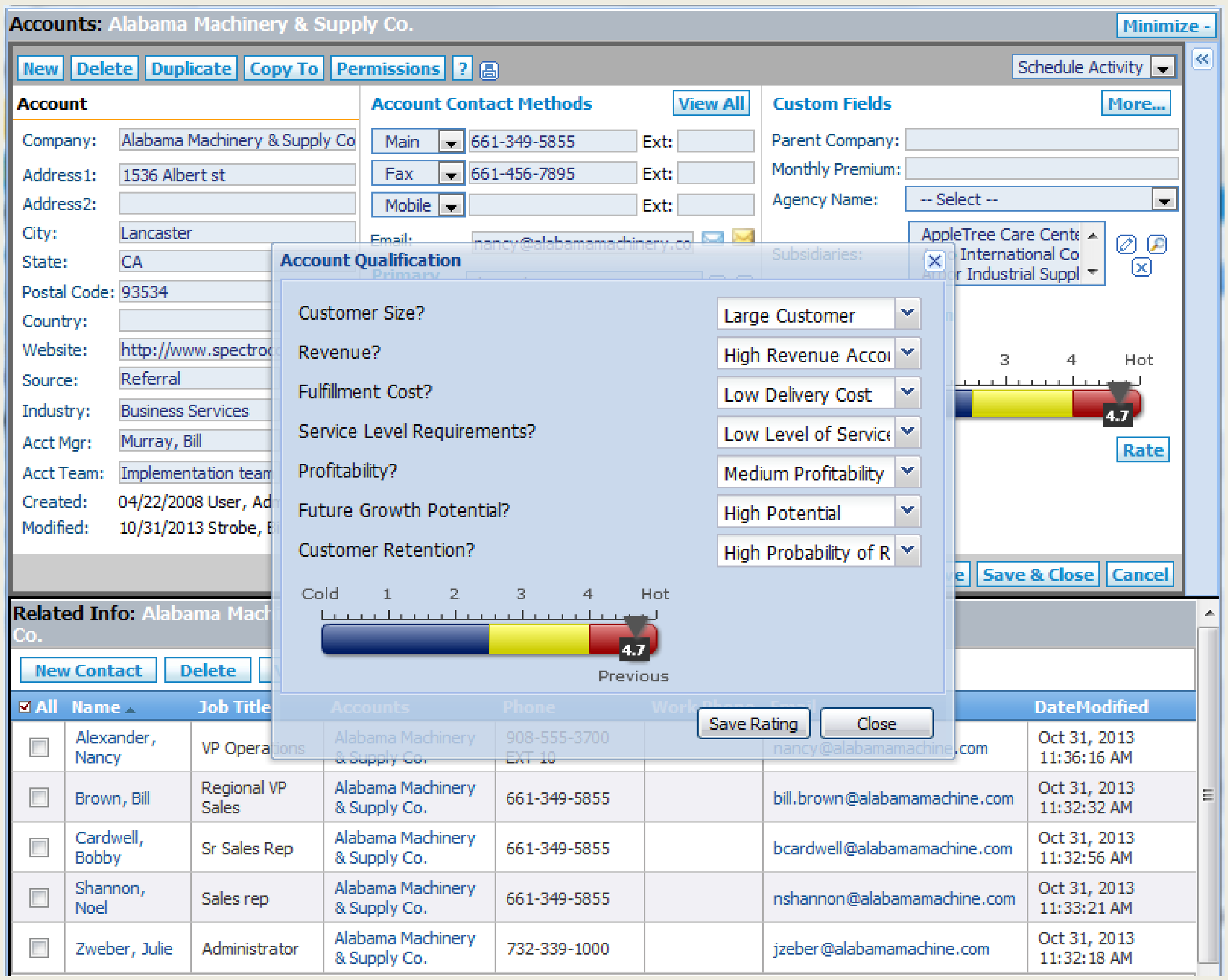
First we built a **Customer Rating System**. As discussed earlier when you are talking to a customer you want to know as much as you can about them. Are they a small, medium or large firm? How long have they been a customer? What have they purchased? How much have they invested with you? How has their service history been and is this a profitable business relationship for you? ***What you really want to know is how valuable they are to your business.*** Makes sense right? Of course it does so we built a feature that automatically ranks and color codes each customer based on a series of questions you answer in the system. The first screen shot displays a list of customers color coded by their value to the business. Red identifies your most valuable customers followed by yellow and blue.

Customer List Displays Customer Ranking – Red are our Most Valuable Customers

All	Company	Primary Contact	Phone	Email	Street 1	City	State	Account Manager	Rating
	Alabama Machinery & Supply Co.	Alexander, Nancy	661-349-5855	nancy@alabamamachinery.com	1536 Albert st	Lancaster	CA	Murray, Bill	
	Bruckner Supply Company	Zippert, Martin	601-833-8502	zippertm@brucknersupply.com	115 Walnut st.	Brookhaven	Mississippi	Strobe, Bill	
	NatWest Bank	Riekkoff, Wayne	606-573-5001	wayner@kmtool.com	P.O. BOX 369	Grays Knob	Kentucky	Strobe, Bill	
	Adidas America	Wardlaw, Scott	718 964 0040	wardlaw1@earthlink.net	164 Atkins Avenue	Brooklyn	New York	Strobe, Bill	
	Gen Bio	Meek, Ward	757-498-1200	wmeek@kar.ca	1604 Dartmoor Ct.	Virginia Beach	Virginia	Strobe, Bill	
	Vantage	Dowdy, Mark	281 932-1955	wtmich@vantage.com	P.O.box 96262	Houston	TX	Strobe, Bill	
	Seton Hall University	Beardshear, Scott	706-825-9363	scottb@mtsupply.com	2983 clarkston rd	South Orange	NJ	Strobe, Bill	
	Jones Oil Company	Jones, Jerry	903-758-3887	sales@cuttingtoolssb.com	15 Brownwood Dr	Longview	Texas	Boone, Misty	
	Weber Accounting	Weber, Dave	931-215-1972	weber@webersupply.com	205 Birchwood Dr	Columbia	Tennessee	Strobe, Bill	
	Ping Golf	Valois, David	877-663-3232	vsi@arn.net	P. O. Box 580443	Elk Grove	California	Cobb, Angela	
	Shamrock Computers	Brown, Tom	925-833-7809	tomm@shamrock.com	508 Roubaud Court	San Ramon	California	Strobe, Bill	

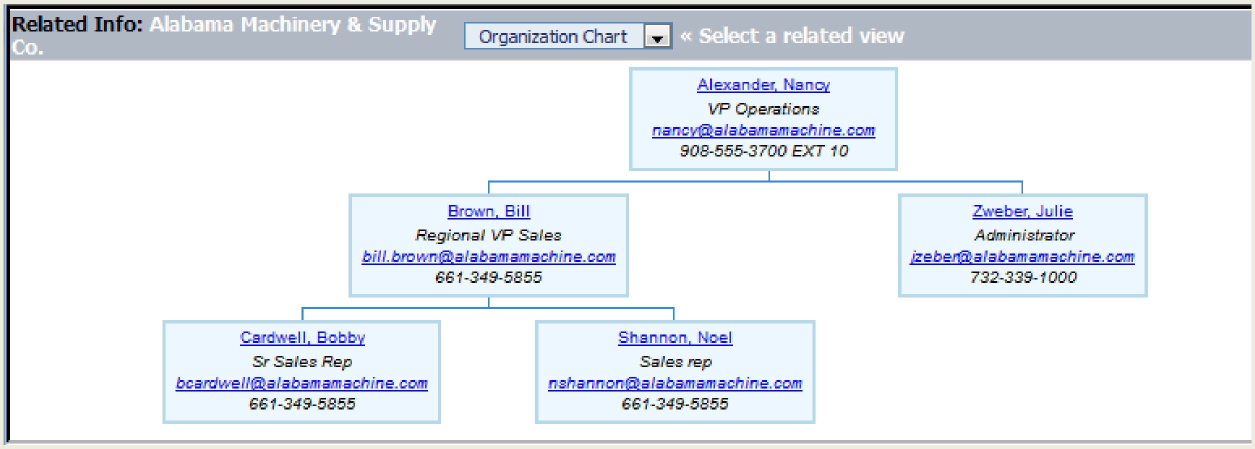
The second screen displays the customer rating feature and sample questions that determine the rating such as the customer size, revenue, future growth potential and more. The questions are completely customizable and you can even give greater weight to one response over another.

Customer Rating System and Qualification Questions built into Commence CRM



Another key feature that we believed would be extremely valuable is an **Automated Organization Chart**. Have you ever been asked to contact a customer or prospect and have no idea who the person is or what their role is in the company? It's a bad way to do business and it's ineffective so we addressed it by building an automated organization chart right inside our system. It graphically displays the key members of an organization and provides you with their name, title, who they report to, their telephone number and their e-mail address. It is a simple but unique feature that delivers tremendous value.

Built-in Graphical Organization Chart



The Second Challenge: Lead Qualification

As a former sales executive I simply could not understand why our monthly and quarterly forecasts were consistently inaccurate with forecasted deals that never closed and others that were not even on the forecast. *I then realized the reason and it's twofold*.

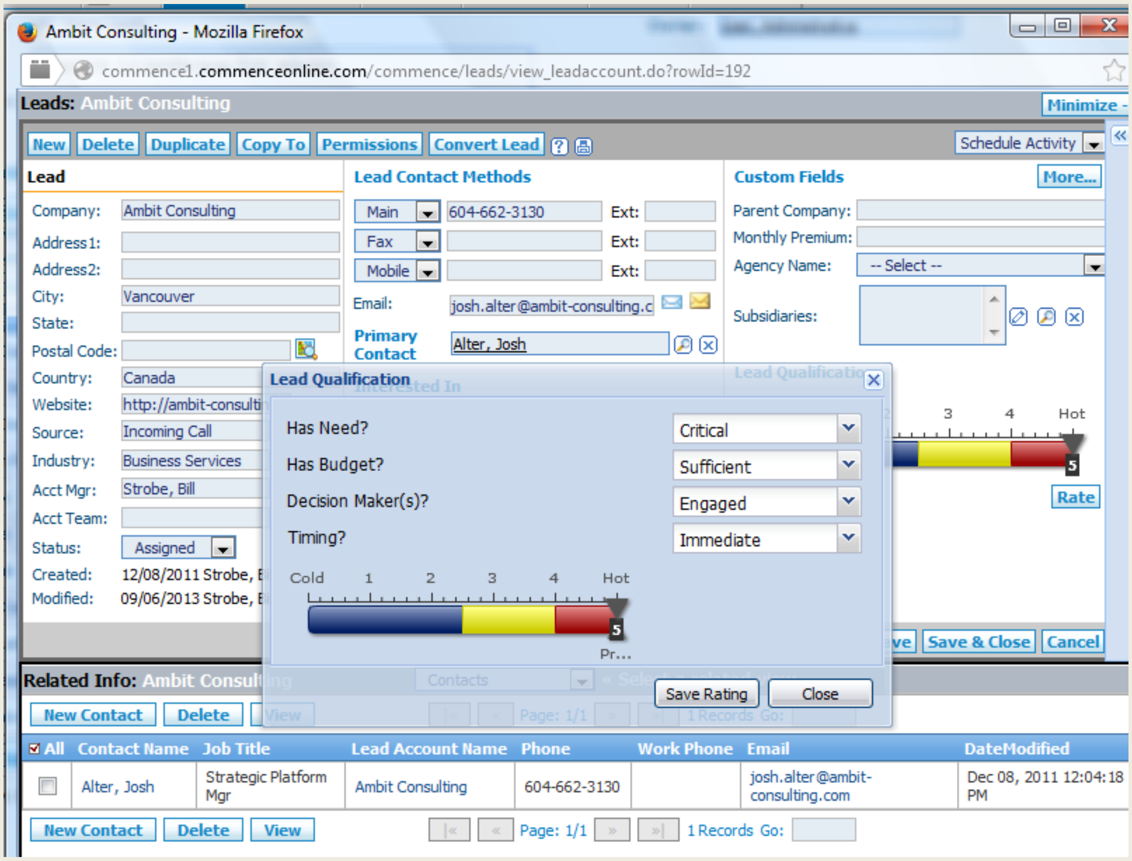
First, most sales organizations are comprised of people with different educational backgrounds and experience levels. Unlike the accounting department where people are highly trained and certified in a specific field, sales people come from many walks of life – from teachers to engineers who may have changed careers to those who have had professional sales training. ***The challenge here is that each one of these people comprehends the information they see and hear differently, then makes a judgment call on who is a qualified prospect and who is not.*** In many cases a qualified prospect to one sales representative may seem completely unqualified to another. Don't believe me? Here is a simple test you can use. Outline a set of criteria about a potential new lead or prospect that has contacted your company. Ask your sales staff to determine if the opportunity is (a) highly qualified, (b) needs to be vetted more or (c) is not a qualified opportunity.

Don't be surprised if you get all three answers. If you do it means that your sales team is qualifying new opportunities based on experience and gut instinct instead of a structured set of qualifying questions. It also means that they may be spending valuable time and money chasing tire kickers instead of highly qualified opportunities. I attacked and solved this problem with minimal effort. Here's how.

I realized that the second problem was that we had no documented criteria for what a qualified lead looked like. So I got the sales team together and we hammered out a short list of questions that would immediately determine a qualified prospect from an unqualified one. We then automated this process using a similar rating and color coding feature that we built in the account rating application.

Outlined in the screen shot below are some sample qualification questions such as; does the prospect have a need for our product or service, do they have a sufficient budget, are the decision makers engaged in the sales process or at least identified and what is their timetable for a decision?

Lead Qualification and Rating Feature



This automated lead qualification feature then rates and color codes the leads based on the answers to the questions. This ensures that every sales representative in the organization is qualifying new leads based on the company's criteria rather than gut instinct. It also enabled our sales staff to be laser focused on the most promising opportunities and has proven to reduce sales cycles and improve close ratios.

Leads Ranked and Color Coded by Criteria – Red Are the Most Qualified Leads

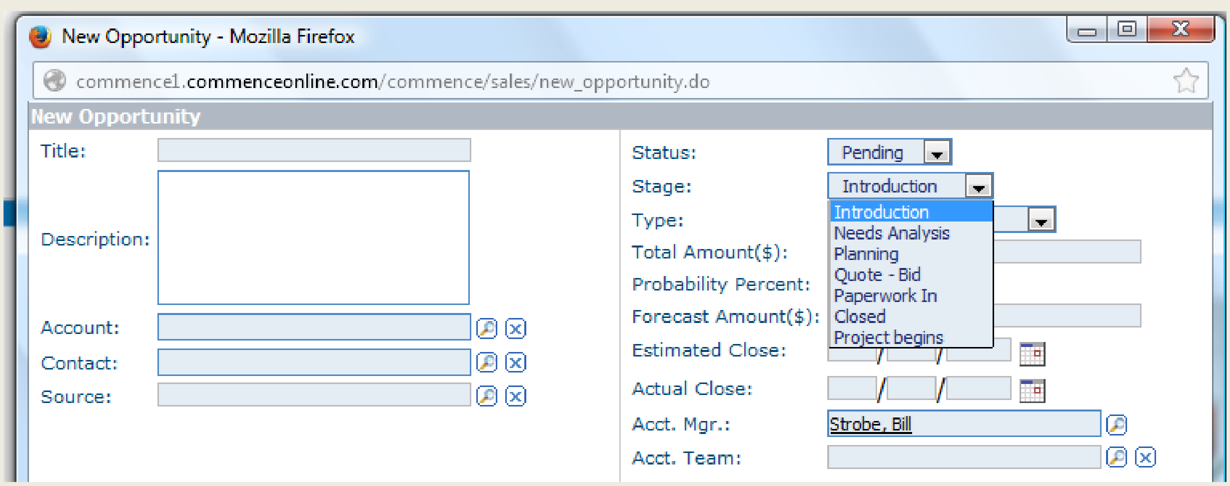
All	Company	Primary Contact	Phone	Email	Assigned To	Rating	Status
	Ambit Consulting	Alter, Josh	604-662-3130	josh.alter@ambit-consulting.com	Strobe, Bill		Assigned
	Jones, Betty	Jones, Betty	333-555-8888		Strobe, Bill		Converted
	Marco Industrial	Jones, Mike	732-220-9100	mjones@marco.com	Strobe, Bill		Assigned
	Bensen Film Compnay	Simpson, Tom	516-424-2300 EXT 210	tsimpson@bensen.com	Strobe, Bill		New
	Tennex	Raiken, Mary	516-379-4400	m.raiken@tennex.com	Strobe, Bill		Converted
	Reeves	Reeves, Donald	206-875-9826	dreeves@gmail.com	Strobe, Bill		Assigned
	TD Bank	Forleitter, Steve	980-763-1200	sforleitter@tdbank.com	Strobe, Bill		New

The Third Challenge: Sales Process Automation

Your sales organizations should operate like a well-oiled machine, enabling management to produce accurate forecasts and predict future revenue, but it's an area that too many companies continue to struggle with. I remember attending board meetings where a forecast from a crystal ball would have been just as accurate as what was provided to me from our regional sales managers. Why, because we did not have a structured sales process in place. We instead relied on an Excel report that changed multiple times a day for two weeks leading up to the board meeting. At Commence, we addressed this by first taking the time to outline a structured sales process i.e. (the steps that were part of every sales cycle) then automating this right within our system. We built a feature that enables you to create and automate your specific sales process, mange and track each stage of the sales cycle and generate reports that enable you to take a proactive approach to every new opportunity.

The screen shot below illustrates the multiple steps of your sales cycle. The stages are completely customizable and allow you to monitor the progress of every deal. You can immediately determine if an opportunity is progressing through the sales cycle as expected or perhaps stalled for some reason. The feature enables you to efficiently manage the sales cycle and proactively manage each phase of the sales process from introduction to closure, and effectively predict the outcome of every deal.

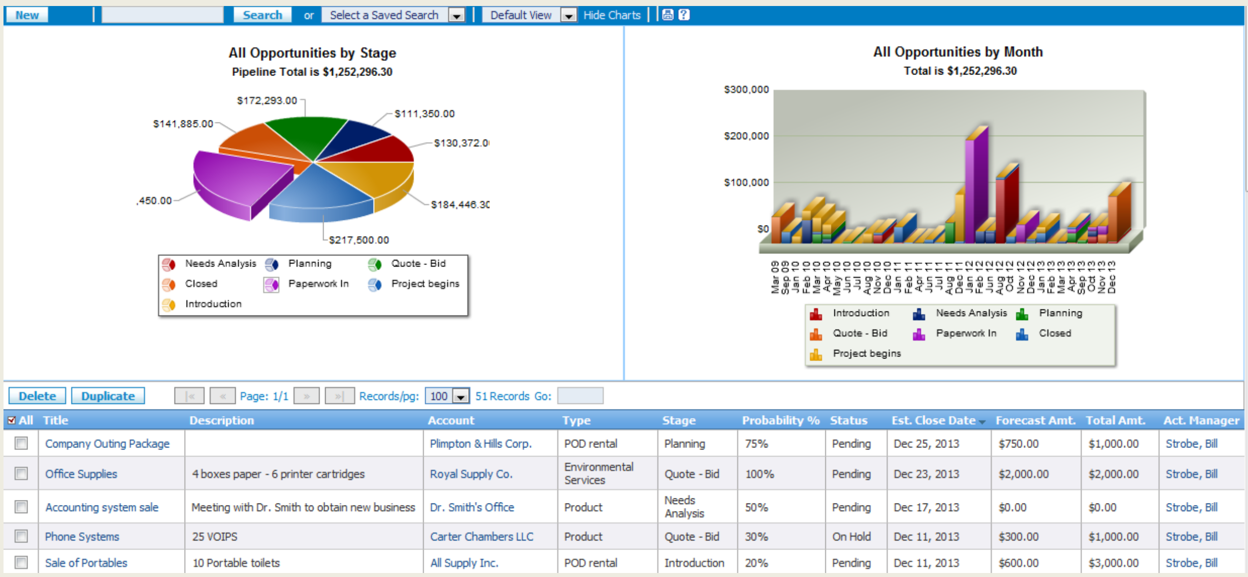
Sales Methodology Screen – Illustrates Steps in the Sales Cycle



The results have been astounding with one customer claiming that in addition to significantly improving the accuracy of their monthly and quarterly forecast, they have realized a 27% increase in revenue since implementing the Commence system.

We also made it easy for the sales staff to manage new opportunities by presenting them with a single screen that displays their active sales opportunities both graphically and in a spreadsheet style view.

Sales Dashboard – Graphical and Spreadsheet View of Opportunities



Clicking on any area within the graph will display a list of each opportunity in that specific stage of the sales cycle and allow you to schedule follow-up activities, add notes or history items, attach documents, create quotes or send and log e-mail correspondence. Clicking on any one of the opportunities in the spreadsheet will display the details of that specific opportunity and adding a new opportunity is as simple as clicking the "New" tab on the top left of the screen. Sales people love the simplicity of this process and appreciate the value of being able to manage each stage of the sales cycle.

Conclusion

Many businesses today are still struggling with addressing the same business challenges that I experienced. I hope that this white paper has provided you with some ideas and guidance for how they can be addressed manually or using CRM software. If you would like to learn more about how Commence CRM and our best business practices can help you to become a more effieient sales and service organization contact Commence sales at 1-877-COMMENCE or visit our website at www.commence.com where you can view our video series or ask for a free test drive.

About the Author

Larry Caretsky is President of Commence Corporation, a leading provider of online CRM software for small to midsize businesses. Caretsky is considered an expert in the field and has written numerous white papers on the subject including S.T.E.P., a proven methodology for the successful implementation of CRM software and an e-book, Practices That Pay – Leveraging Information to Achieve Selling Results.