# The 7 Step

Sales framework we used to
build a $31M business unit

...in the worst market
in a decade

**tm.** Tim Muenchen

# The 7-Step Sales Framework We Used To Build a New $31M Business Unit in the Worst Market in a Decade

Growing a business is hard…

How hard?

Consider the statistics:
- 90% of new start-ups fail
- Only 40% of new start-ups ever turn a profit
- And only 15% of businesses reach more than $1M in revenue

That's not exactly the advertisement for starting a new venture. And it's even harder to start and grow a new business when the market you sell into is contracting.

BUT… it's not impossible… or even unlikely.

As Warren Buffet once said about growing a business and risk: "There's only risk, if you don't know what you're doing."

If you build and execute the right process, have an unwavering determination, and iterate with the punches… great things can happen.

And that's exactly what did.

Here's the 7-step framework I used at FLS to build a $31M business unit from ground zero in the worst market in a decade (and I'm not even talking about the global COVID pandemic).

## The cards were stacked against us

Before we get into the 7-step framework and the glory story, let's talk a little about the market and the market forces stacked against us.

First, it's important to note that we were selling in a hyper-competitive and largely undifferentiated space.

FLS is a digital freight broker that sells transportation services to the largest shippers in North America. While FLS is world-class in its service offerings and approach, there are 17,000 licensed freight brokers in the U.S.

So, to say it is competitive would be an understatement.

Couple this with a contracting market – meaning, demand for freight services tanked in 2019 when we launched this effort – and it shows you how the cards were NOT in our favor.

How bad was it?

Take a peek at the Cass Freight Index below.

The Cass index measures overall demand for freight services in North America.



**The Cass Freight Index - Shipment Volume**
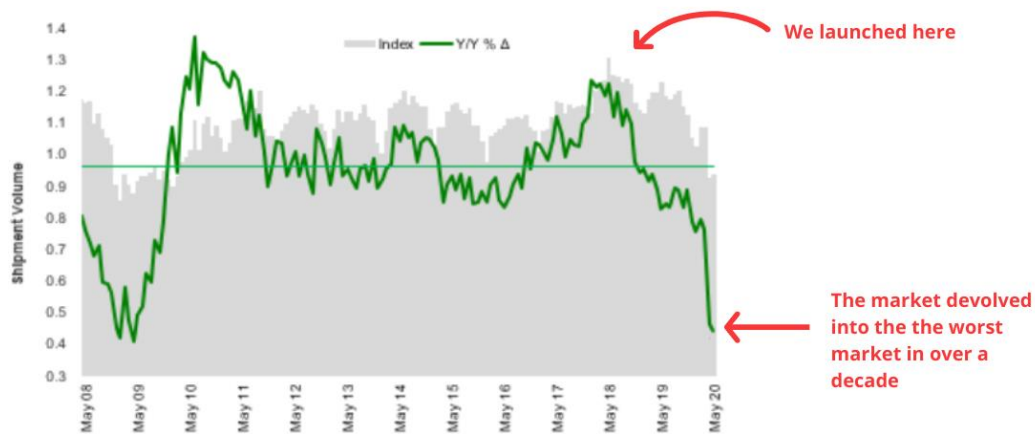
Source: Cass Information Systems, Inc and Stifel Research

What the chart shows is that as we launched this project in 2019 the overall market had just peaked. And during the next year the market crashed, devolving into the worst freight market in a decade.

The freight market is a lot like the stock market… it's very hard to outrun the overall market conditions.

And that's where we started.

In a hyper-competitive, undifferentiated, and contracting market… BUT despite this, we had an amazing trajectory.

# A snapshot of success

That's right, even though it was an uphill battle both ways in the snow (I borrowed that from a boomer), we had tremendous success.

Here's a snapshot of the growth curve:



**The Growth Curve**
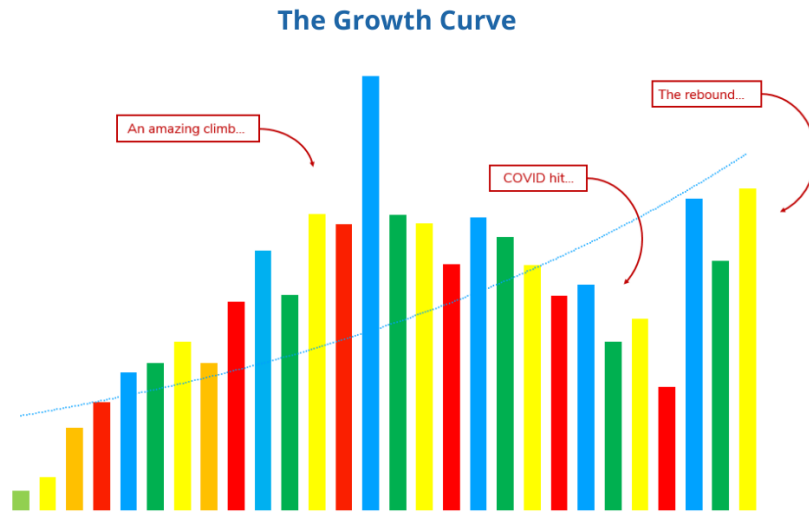
And, I'd like to add that this was profitable growth.

We didn't just throw money at a new business unit to grow at all costs.

We delivered positive ROI on overall spend in the first year and maintained a healthy six figure monthly gross profit throughout year two… despite the pandemic.

So, this was a business unit that contributed significantly to both the revenue and profitability lines.

# The 7-step framework

Ok, enough of the preamble. Let's dive into the framework we used to make this happen.

Here's the 7 step sales framework that we used to build the machine.



**The 7 Step Sales Framework for Growth**

Step 1: Written process & playbook
Step 2: Clear goals
Step 3: The right data
Step 4: Sales automation
Step 5: Phone is the difference
Step 6: Script and objections
Step 7: Weekly reporting & accountability

# Step 1: We had a written sales process and playbook that broke down everything

The process and playbook was our written go-to-market plan.

The process was a variation of the sales process I've outlined on this site and in The Ultimate Sales Playbook.

The core of the playbook was our 10-step sales process that guided a rep from selecting a prospect through closing and expanding the account.

## The 10 Step Sales Process



The playbook also covered, well, everything:
- Our ideal client profile and bad fits / wastes of time
- How to research and select prospects and add to our CRM
- Our outbound contact cadence
- Our inbound contact cadence
- The email scripts
- The call scripts and objection handling
- How to close and complete a sale
- How to land and expand an account
- How to use the technology and tools
- And the daily schedule for effective time management

Why did we need a playbook?

There's 8 core reasons to have a rock solid playbook… one that provides reps the structure to be in control… make daily progress… and understand why they succeed or fail.

1) **A consistent process rep to rep means quality control**.
Whether the pitch is delivered by the most tenured rep or the newbie, fresh out of new hire training, a process ensures the pitch is delivered consistently and with quality.
2) **A process delivers efficiency.**
Ever watch a master craftsman at work? They seem to deliver beautiful work with little to no effort.  Meanwhile, the apprentice grinds around producing mediocre work. A process ensures no more and no less work than is needed. It delivers mastery.

3) **A process provides a roadmap**
   For the rep… the customer… and for the VP of Sales. You know where you are in the sale and more importantly you know the next step. There are no surprises.

4) **It delivers more accurate forecasting**.
   The process is not a broad set of rules with a few squishy sales stages that go into the CRM. Process delivers a well-oiled machine that clicks off protocols and next steps with clarity.

5) **A process leaves a better impression on clients.**
   No stone is left unturned. No time is wasted. The process delivers value from beginning to end. Ever have a really good sales person? One that you made buying a pleasure? They deliver a better customer experience.

6) **A process allows you to be a trusted advisor**.
   With a process there is zero "shooting from the hip". Every one of your sales reps can take the challenger role and teach, tailor and take control of the sales dialog.

7) **A process allows you to be world class**.
   We live in a commodity world. If you have a good business model, someone has copied it… or likely will. And then, how you do something is as important as what you do. A world class process makes your company a world class leader.

8) **The right sales formula is built around a scientific process.**
   So, your game plan is to build a process… a proven system.

I'm continually amazed at companies that don't have this detail. I've hired sales reps for two decades and I've venture to say that 90% of the experienced reps that come to me have never had this structure.

As noted in The Challenger Sale (one of the great sales books of all time), effective selling is driven from commercial teaching. Challenging your prospects to think about the business differently through insights while teaching, tailoring and taking control of the conversation.

And this needs to come from the sales and marketing leadership, not having sales reps just "wing it".

Every winning team has a playbook. And the greatest ones have a process.

Saban and Belichick will testify. If you're going to build a high velocity machine. One that fires on all cylinders with scaleable, predictable, and repeatable revenue, you sure better have a process.

A central part of our success was in the go-to-market plan and that was documented in our written sales process and playbook.

## Step 2: We had clear daily, weekly, and monthly goals

Since we were starting from scratch, there were no existing customer upsell opportunities or service distractions to keep our reps from focusing on the top of the funnel work.

So, this meant heavy focus on an outbound push to get us in front of new prospects.

As our team and model matured, we eventually built an inbound machine that delivered hundreds of quality leads to the team per month… but starting out it was bare knuckle outbound.

We started at 20 new leads per day per rep and put them through an email and call cadence (more on that below)… and we put tight metrics in place relative to the steps of the funnel waterfall.

Measuring the conversion rate from each stage of the funnel not only gave us a predictability in what to expect on the results side, but it also allowed us to identify what each rep might be struggling with.

## The Metrics Waterfall and Funnel Conversion

| | Calls | Leads | Connect Rate | Connects | Connect Conversion Rate | Discovery Calls | Qualification Conversion Rate | Qualified Opportunity | SQL Conversion Rate | Quote | Quote Conversion | Close Won | Paid $ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Goal | | 400 | 25% | 100 | 30% | 30 | 50% | 15 | 80% | 12 | 40% | 5 | $$$$K |
| Rep 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | - |
| Rep 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | - |
| Rep 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | - |
| Total | | 400 | 25% | 100 | 30% | 30 | 50% | 15 | 80% | 12 | 40% | 5 | $$$$K |

Hustle quotient · Pitch quality · Objection handling · Value illustration · Win rate

Here's what the funnel conversion looked like:

- **Lead to connect = Hustle quotient**.
  Were we hustling enough to get in front of buyers?
- **Connect to discovery** = **Pitch quality**.
  How well did we take the first punch and get them to move forward?
- **Discovery to qualification = Objection handling**.
  How well were we able to identify needs and create a solid opportunity?
- **Opportunity to quote = Value illustration**.
  How well were we able to illustrate value and let us give them a quote?
- **Quote to close = Win rate**.
  How well were we able to earn their business and close a deal?
- **Lead to close = Overall efficiency score**.
  This was like our quarterback rating. How many leads does a rep need to work to hit their target?

We started with baseline assumptions for all of these metrics.  We evaluated and measured them weekly across the team for months and eventually came up with a model that delivered consistent success.

The key point here is to start. Build a model. Test some assumptions. Measure and iterate.

There were non-negotiables for daily leads and calls, number of pitches, quotes, and ultimately new customers.  If you didn't hit certain metrics, it was clear that you weren't going to be successful on the productivity line.

An important note here is that the numbers changed over time – based on our continued measuring and better definition of what the results should be and the stage of the rep.
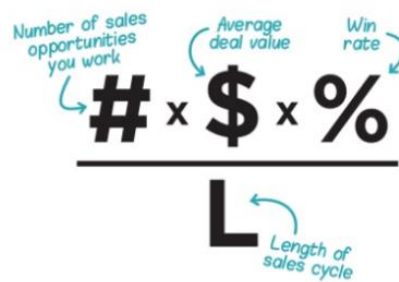
A rep that had a base of accounts and was getting regular business, clearly needed to focus on expanding those relationships vs continually building new relationships.

So, we had different expectations for where each rep was relative to tenure and building their book of business.

Ultimately it's a math equation. Sales velocity has 4 components.

1) Number of opportunities
2) Average or expected deal value
3) Win rate
4) Length of sales cycle

## The Sales Velocity Equation

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And we used these metrics to manage the horsepower and results.

Daily, weekly, and monthly metrics for activity and performance allowed us to understand how to onboard and build successful reps and build the business.

## Step 3: The process starts with data

Shoot at the wrong targets… and you're certain to miss every time.

While we could sell to a broad market. That wasn't our ideal client profile. Our ideal client profile was the prospect whose problem we directly solved, every time.

And in order to find our best clients, it took research.

I started by pulling a list of our top customers and former customers and taking a deep dive on their profile.

I wanted to know their exact firmographics – industry vertical, business size, geography, the exact titles of our buyers, and their account characteristics (for us that was things like shipping volume, type of freight, shipping lanes, etc.).

What we ended up with was 87 different NAICS codes, 95 different titles, a broad revenue range, and all of North America… I kid you not…

We ultimately whittled this down to 23 NAICS codes, 15 exact titles, and 26 states of origin.  This gave us a target data set that we'd be most successful with.

We also came up with a list of bad fits and wastes of time.  This was a defined company profile as well as trigger words that if we heard during the sales process we knew they were sure to be losers.

Once we understood the exact ideal client profile, we used data to source our targets.

This included our CRM data (dormant customers and past prospects), [Synthio](#) (to build a look alike target list), and the mother of all data sources [ZoomInfo](#).

Armed with the best data tools available and a specific profile, we were able to target the right buyers every time.

(A note on [ZoomInfo](#) – it really is the best tool on the market. I've tested pretty much every data source out there.  They provide an amazing tool for prospecting.  We even tested their intent data and were very pleased with the results.  While it is expensive for a large sales team, it is worth every penny. And no, I don't get paid anything to say that. Just a huge fan.)

Point is… it all starts with data.  Make sure you know your exact ideal client profile and make sure your sales team only targets those prospects.

## Step 4: We used sales automation for contact

Technology has changed the sales game.

There's an amazing set of tools that we now have at our disposal. Everything from data mining, to marketing automation, to sales automation, to auto dialers, to chat, to online collaboration, to CRM, to reporting and metrics… and it doesn't end… it really doesn't.

If you're leading a sophisticated sales team and it feels like you're running a technology lab, you're in the right neighborhood.

Tools will help you connect with the right targets faster, while delivering a richer customer experience.

They can turn your little 4 cylinder sales machine into a V-8 turbo charged beast.

The core tools for any high velocity sales team are the CRM and the sales automation tool.  And our sales automation tool was central to our building the machine.

We used [Hubspot Sales](#) for our sales automation.  Since we also used [Hubspot](#) for our marketing automation, it only made sense.

More specifically we leveraged three tools in the platform for sales:

1) The sales sequence tool for our email cadences
2) The dialer for call recording (and subsequent training)
3) The reporting package to measure the performance of our activities

The email tool allowed us to contact prospects at scale. We also used the activity notifications, so we were able synchronize our call and email efforts.

The magic in sales outreach is to combine a valuable message set with the correct contact cadence.  And let me be clear, this is an art not a science.  So, it requires testing and iteration.

I have a couple rules when it comes to outreach…

1) Make a tight cadence over a short period of time.
2) Make the email short. Your executive audience isn't going to read a wall of words. It should be a bullet point read.
3) Speak to their pain and make sure it's real.
4) Make the copy valuable and to the point.
5) Personalize it, but you don't have to go crazy.
6) Include a helpful link at the end (it doesn't have to be yours).
7) Make your point with results oriented stats and numbers to stand out.
8) Your subject lines need to be fire. For this to work your emails have to get opened.
9) Think WIIFM. If they read the entire series would they learn something valuable? Would they be compelled to respond because this could help them? Be real here!
10)  Can it read like a sideways sales letter? What if I never opened the emails and just read the subject lines… would I get it?
11) The phone is the difference maker. It's the double tap that will make you stand out.

We started with a 15 x 12 cadence.  15 touches over 12 working days. If that sounds pretty amped up… it's because it needed to be.  What we found was that if we were true to the cadence – and hit all touch points – we were able to reach the prospects.  (Yes dear, outbound does still work).

## The 15x12 Contact Cadence

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
| TOUCH 1 Email 1 | | TOUCH 4 Email 2 | | TOUCH 6 Email 3 | | | TOUCH 9 Email 4 | | TOUCH 12 Email 5 | | TOUCH 14 Email 6 |
| TOUCH 2 Call 1 | TOUCH 3 Call 2 No VM | TOUCH 5 Call 3 | | TOUCH 7 Call 4 | | | TOUCH 10 Call 5 | TOUCH 11 Call 6 No VM | TOUCH 13 Call 7 | | TOUCH 15 Call 8 |
| | | | | | TOUCH 8 Social Touch 1 | | | | | | |

We'd regularly rotate the messaging to make sure it was relevant to what was happening in the market.

And above all, we wanted to use our sales messaging to take that educational challenger position – to teach our prospects about what was happening in the market and how we could help them better navigate what was happening.

And here's the best part… whether they took action or not, the messaging taught them something. We were keen to talk about what was happening in the market and what smart businesses were doing to respond. It was value… and not a sales pitch.

Whether you choose Hubspot, SalesLoft, Outreach or any of the other sales engagement platforms, they are all crucial to building a high velocity sales team.  I don't think you can perform modern sales or expect rapid growth without them.

Sales automation and a commitment to full contact through our cadence was a central piece to our success.

## Step 5: The phone is the difference maker

Yeah, the new email tools are cool, but you know what makes you stand out?

The phone.

Don't let your sales team play future email marketers of America.

Double tap your contacts daily (email and phone). Do it throughout your cadence and they'll know who you are and why you are calling.

Let me put it this way… when's the last time someone called you 8 times and sent 6 emails over 12 business days… and you didn't know why they were calling?

Never.

Could some say that's a little obnoxious?  Maybe.

But isn't that also the job of a sales rep? To get your product in front of the right buyers? Certainly it is.

If the messaging is truly valuable and you are respectful in how you make the approach, all you are trying to do is deliver value to someone you know will get results out of your product or service.

I've always believed this is my responsibly as a sales rep – to let them know we have a better way of doing it.

A key point here is… no drive by selling.

Your prospect is bombarded by messaging and their daily responsibilities. That one contact every two weeks, just isn't going to cut it. It's your job to stand out and make contact.

As leader, create a non-negotiable email, call, and social contact cadence. Amp up the outreach over a short period of time. And make it so good they can't ignore you.

We were able to build the business largely off an inside sales model.  Of course once COVID hit, there wasn't any other option.

The commitment to the phone and daily calls was essential to our success.

## Step 6: We scripted the call and rebuttals

For the love of God and all things under the sun… DO NOT let your sales team make stuff up.

Sadly many teams just "show up and throw up". Each rep makes up their own pitch with a little guidance from the sales deck. I beg you to please stop.

Written sales scripts and objection responses are mandatory. Regular role play is also mandatory.

People are going to buy to two reasons only: (1) you solve a pain or (2) you realize a gain.

Part of your branding and commercial teaching should be to understand this and communicate this… in as few words as possible.

The entire sales process revolves around a simple dialog:
- Current situation
- Desired situation
- The gap
- Getting them to agree the gap exists
- Getting them to agree they want to solve the gap
- Getting them to agree that they want to talk to you about how you can help them solve it

That's it.  That is selling.  Identify the gap – with them – and then sell to it.

Keenan has done a great job with his Gap Selling program recently, but this concept isn't new.  It's been around since the OG days of Ron Willingham and Integrity Selling.

The point here is script everything for your team. The calls… the objection responses… the emails.

Do not let your team just make stuff up and say anything. Everything you say and send should be part of your brand promise and the value you deliver relative to the problem you solve.

You should also be monitoring calls and doing call recording training. Nothing ramps a rep faster than hearing themselves pitch on the phone.

Our scripted sales pitch and objection responses didn't mean we would win every call, but they gave us the best chance to advance every call.

And the script is a living document.  We updated the talk track and objection responses regularly. A month didn't go by where we would learn how to position something better. This is iterative.

A central piece of success is having a core pitch and making sure everyone is keyed in on delivering your brand story.

## Step 7: We had weekly reporting to measure the success and build accountability

Your team wants mastery of their craft. You need to build a shared lens for the business. One of the ways you accomplish this through WEEKLY reporting.

Like any good sports team, you should always be looking at last week's game film and breaking down how you can get better.

For us this was done via a Thursday night summary report and Friday afternoon huddle.

I get it… everyone hates meetings.  But when they are valuable… they are necessary.

Funnel, velocity, close rate & deal size are just the start. If you're not measuring every step from lead to acquisition you're flying blind.

Not only did we have goals for all our KPIs, but we relentlessly tracked them and talked about them so that we could really understand what was working and were we needed to improve.

Set conversion benchmarks for activity and performance at each step of the funnel. Build team and rep standards. Establish weekly meetings and make them mandatory.

Not only is it helpful, but it also builds accountability.  Everyone has to report their numbers and results to their peer group.  Everyone understands there are certain activity and performance requirements.  If you're not pulling your weight, you've let down the team.

This meeting also builds culture and comradery.  Everyone is pulling for their teammates to win individually and as a team.  If someone is doing the work and not getting the result, the team will be quick to lend a helping hand.

Improvement comes from analysis of the positive and negative results.

We were able to build a successful growth machine because we analyzed what worked… every week as a team.

## A boy and a plan = success… hardly!!

That's how the glory story usually reads… right?

We had this idea… then we built our plan… we got after it… and wa-la… success.

Yeah, it's not quite that easy.

I'm certainly not the first person to pen a framework that provides some guidance to building a meaningful business unit… And say, "Look, this is what works!"

Even when you have a plan it doesn't guarantee success.

I can assure you, the journey to build this $31M annual business unit in 30 months came with plenty of scars.

The business chewed up some great reps. It wasn't for everyone. Truth be told, our rep turnover was not what I am accustomed to. It was high.

And when the market flip turned against us… we had some bad months… numerically and emotionally. This sh** was hard.

Building something from nothing isn't easy. Big Ben chronicled it all in [The Hard Thing About Hard Things](#).

You may be tempted to look at the framework and say "duh", this stuff is obvious. And maybe it is.

And it's not that the framework is any genius… but you know what is?

Discipline.

One of my favorite sayings is: "The undisciplined will die."

And that was the magic elixir… an unwavering commitment to these seven steps.

1.  We had a process and playbook that broke down everything
2.  We set clear daily, weekly, monthly goals
3.  Our process started with data and the right targets
4.  We used sales automation for contact
5.  The phone was the difference maker
6.  We scripted the calls and rebuttals
7.  We had weekly reporting to measure success and build accountability

Most companies and leaders don't have the mettle to put this in place… to be committed to it… to be relentless about making sure reps follow it… and to constantly improve it.

That's what it takes. And that's why we had so much success!

## Thank you and Namaste.

This was a heroic effort by a wonderful set of humans.

Because of our commitment to these principles, we built a highly profitable business unit that billed $31M in its second year… in a hyper competitive, undifferentiated market that that devolved into the worst market in a decade… and then was challenged by a global pandemic.

Yes, we accomplished something grand together.  No one person was responsible. It was impossible without everyone who touched this project.

I'm a realist when it comes to jobs and work and teams...

We have this great moment in time.  To build something together. To make some money. To take that next step in our careers together. To have some fun. And this project lived up to that.

I want to thank everyone who was part of this. This includes the current team at FLS and all the team members who have journeyed to their next destination.

It wasn't easy, but nothing rewarding or meaningful ever is.  Growth only comes from the challenges in life.  And we built a beautiful business together.

## Summary

And there you have it. The recipe. The blueprint. The seven step sales framework we used to build a $31M annual revenue business unit in under 30 months.

If you follow these steps and commit fully, I know this process will work for you.

Of course, if I can answer any questions about the framework, just reach out… Call me, email me, or hit me up on the socials.