# When Good Leads Die on the Vine

How Modern Sales Managers Use Technology to Eliminate Cherry Picking and Give Each Lead its Due

by Oleg Rogynskyy - Founder and CEO of People.ai

In sales, the term 'cherry-picking' refers to when a salesperson selectively chooses what they perceive to be the best leads available to them, rather than following up on all the leads they have to work that are not obvious for disqualification. Cherry-picking is about as common in sales as it is in Traverse City, Michigan - every salesperson does it and marketers everywhere are frustrated by it.

While cherry-picking makes marketers cringe, to your sales team, it's really just synonymous with prioritization. That said, when the sales team focuses too much energy on their "ideal" leads, they tend to ignore the ones that are just as likely—if not more so—to buy.
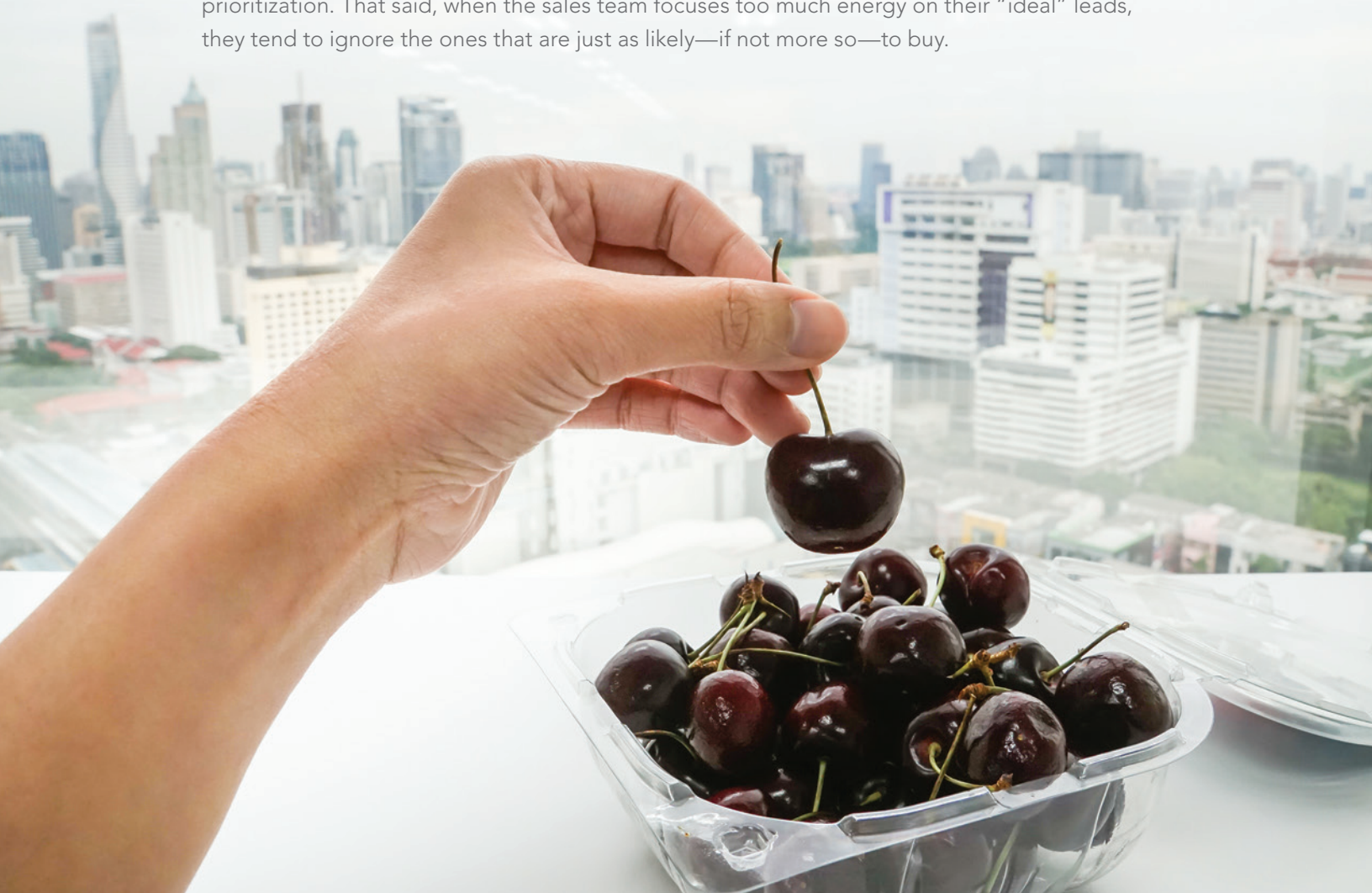
Why Salespeople Cherry-Pick

Even if you're using the best tools around—marketing automation, predictive lead-scoring, ABM solutions—and investing in training your sales team, cherry-picking can still be common. Humans are imperfect, and it's natural - even unconscious - for us to trust our instincts when making decisions. Salespeople will naturally reach out to preferred leads often without recognizing their own biases. For teams that on a mission to be more data-driven, such cognitive bias of people who don't possess same information as marketers will lead to a skewed signal of what works and what doesn't, thus killing all possible predictive decision making at its root.

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Take an attendee list from a recent trade show, for example. Marketing provides that list to sales and walks them through the process of calling down the list of 1,000 people, working each lead through eight templated touch points, and booking as many meetings as possible. Will each salesperson spend the right amount of attention on each lead?

Unfortunately, what happens next is very common. Your sales team will sort through the list and find companies that look familiar, look for titles that have VP or CXO in them, and start there. If the salesperson can't get meetings with the top companies and the top people on their list after just a few touches, they move on and assume that the rest of leads from the campaign aren't any good and don't follow up on them.

The Consequences of Cherry-Picking

Automated reminders and "hot lead" notifications can only do so much, and without intelligence behind them, these notifications can quickly become noise. Salespeople will naturally gravitate toward the leads that look better to them—whether it's a brand name, location, title, or industry that appeals to them. Take, for example, two hot leads with an equal lead score. One lead is from a Fortune 50 company and the other lead is from a Fortune 1000 company. Which lead do you think will get the most attention? While it's understandable to start with the Fortune 50 lead, completely ignoring the lead from the Fortune 1000 company is leaving a potential lead to die on the vine.

With this type of cherry-picking approach, many viable leads get de-prioritized and possibly forgotten - and it's a big problem with monetary consequences. Beyond the loss of potential revenue, if a salesperson ignores an eager lead, they've likely permanently soured a relationship with someone who previously had a positive perception of their brand. In our example, let's

assume that the Fortune 1000 lead went to a competitor's website, got a phone call almost immediately, and now they're signing the paperwork. And our cherry-picking salesperson is still trying to chase down a meeting with the Fortune 50 company.

Cherry-picking can damage internal processes as well. When salespeople rely on their personal criteria (brand name, industry, etc), they potentially undermine the company's criteria for lead follow-up. For example, there may be a process to follow-up on all leads over a specific lead score, or all leads above a certain title threshold or company size.

Unintentional as it may be, that kind of consistent divergence from best practices makes it far more difficult to run a data-driven sales organization. And that behavior can spread. If one account executive regularly ignores warm leads and only works their perceived "perfect" leads, their peers may follow in pursuit. Suddenly your mantra of "No good lead left behind" is left behind, too.

How to Prevent It

So how do sales leaders keep their team from picking and choosing how they'll spend their time? They start with data.

The most effective sales managers are those who:

1. Capture and analyze sales activity across all channels, such as email, calendar, phone, and even text messaging, so they can pinpoint common causes of cherry-picking, lack of follow-up and remedy

2. Set up an automated process that ensures all qualified leads get the optimal amount of attention

3. Monitor team behavior, including the amount of time they spend on a lead before disqualifying, and where they spend the majority of their time in general

Smarter sales management and better sales performance aren't such lofty feats when you have the right technology and processes in place. When sales managers study their team with reliable and easy-to-access data in hand, they can quickly learn how to play up the team's strengths and mitigate their weaknesses.

Using Sales and Marketing Alignment to Prevent Cherry-Picking

Marketing regularly deems leads as qualified, via lead scoring or other thresholds (like downloading specific pieces of content or requesting a demo). But how do marketing teams know if the right amount of sales effort and attention is being given to these qualified leads? In most organizations, it's a black hole for the marketing team after they pass along their leads to the sales team. That's why sales activity tracking is so powerful. It is a win-win for both marketing and sales, in providing greater transparency into what happens after leads are passed along to sales, and how to optimize activities from both teams.

I highly recommend sales and marketing sit down and agree to the ideal lead follow up process, and ensuring you have the technology to track it. Ask one another, what's the acceptable amount of time to pass before a lead gets followed up on? How many touches should a hot lead get before we mark it unresponsive? And how many of those touches should be emails versus phone calls? What is the time frame that can pass before a lead gets disqualified? What systems will this involve and do we have the technology stack in place to track and measure this?
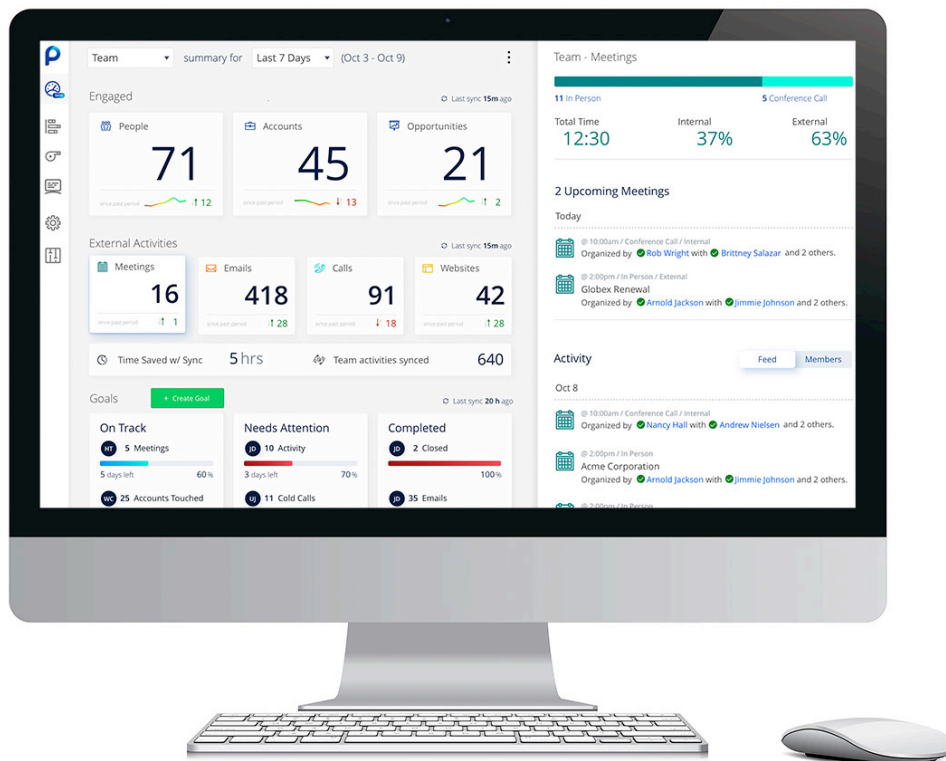
Set up thresholds for the various types of leads you receive each week such as webinar, tradeshow, and partner leads. This differs for every organization, but it's important for sales and marketing to agree to this jointly. (If you're struggling with how to figure out what the right mixture of follow-up is needed to convert a lead, drop us a line at sales@people.ai and we can share how we do this at People.ai!)

"We found that one of the reasons the sales teams were cherry-picking leads is because they didn't have the right information about the campaigns we were running," said Francesca Krihely, Senior Manager, Developer Advocacy, at MongoDB. "We worked with our sales counterparts to 1) provide them with more insight and background into our campaigns and 2) align on follow up expectations. By working together we were able to to make sure leads (and marketing dollars) weren't being left on the vine to dry out."

The Data-Driven Solution to Stop Cherry-Picking

Before you throw up your hands and assume you can't leverage technology to solve this problem, hear me out. Taking a data-centric approach to conquering cherry-picking can start small. The first step I recommend is removing manual data entry. Yes, you read that correctly. Stop your sales team from manually creating every contact and painfully logging every single one of their activities. Instead, use a tool that will allow you to automate it.

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By automating contact creation and activity logging you'll ensure that no one forgets to add a decision maker to a target account or identify someone as an Opportunity Contact Role. With automation in place, no phone call, email, or meeting will go unaccounted for in your CRM, and the data in your CRM will be both accurate and up-to-date?

Once you have captured the correct data, you can start to understand how the sales team is working leads, contacts, accounts, and opportunities. These insights will allow you to clearly see if sales is dedicating the right amount of time on qualifying leads, such as how many calls, emails, or meetings were associated with each lead.

With People.ai, sales managers and marketers can see just how much time sales is spending on a lead, campaign, segment, or any other element of marketing output. Is a salesperson sending the same non-personalized message to 990 leads and thoroughly covering only 10? Which 10 and why? With sales activity tracking, you'll have a full view into what happens after those leads are passed to the sales team and can optimize processes on both the sales and marketing sides.

If qualified leads aren't being given the attention they deserve, you'll be able to identify this quickly and work with the sales team to show them the potential upside in working a greater amount of qualified leads more effectively. On the flip side, if you find that the team spending

too little time on every individual lead, it may be the case that the team is overloaded with too many leads at a given time. This could be due to marketing qualification criteria not being strict enough before passing to sales, a sales capacity imbalance, or potentially too many campaigns in flight at one time.

Additionally, you can use the data from this exercise to optimize the capacity of your sales team. At People.ai we used our own sales activity data to determine we know that every marketing qualified lead (MQL) requires a minimum of 18 minutes of sales activity on the part of our sales development representative (SDR) to give it a real shot.

- The average SDR will work eight hours per day:
- That's 480 minutes per day minus 60 minutes for lunch and another 60 minutes for coffees, distractions, watercooler conversations, etc.
- That leaves us with 360 minutes of concentrated work per day, and 360 min per day divided by 18 minutes = 20
- This means a solid SDR can only process a maximum of 20 qualified leads per day
- That's 100 leads per week, or 400 leads per month

Seems pretty simple, right? Surprisingly, most companies we speak with give their SDRs thousands of leads from marketing, partners, etc EVERY DAY or WEEK—not even just per month! Every selling motion is different—from the product or service you're selling to the buyer you're selling to—but thousands of leads per week, for a single person, is nearly an impossible feat, and only exacerbates the problem of cherry-picking.

Again, this may sound daunting, but solutions like People.ai make aligning sales and marketing truly attainable through intelligent, automated technology. To learn more, request a demo today and let us show you how leading organizations are already taking this approach.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO SEE PEOPLE.AI IN ACTION TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT CAN DO FOR YOUR SALES AND MARKETING ORGANIZATIONS, GET A PERSONALIZED DEMO HERE.

About the Author

Oleg Rogynskyy is the CEO and Founder of People.ai. Prior to People.ai Oleg helped start and scale three big data companies, two of which, including Oleg's own Semantria, were subsequently acquired. He has a passion for data science, machine learning and text analytics. At People.ai, Oleg is leveraging these technologies to solve the age-old problem of measuring and optimizing human productivity.

About People.ai

People.ai is the AI platform for data-driven sales and marketing. We give sales leaders a complete picture of sales activities and leverage AI to help them manage their teams based on hard data, rather than assumptions. Marketing teams gain visibility into how their leads move through the funnel after being passed to sales, allowing them to attribute sales activity to the right leads, campaigns, and opportunities. With AI, People.ai is finally bridging the gap between sales and marketing.

People.ai is headquartered in San Francisco, CA and is backed by Y Combinator and Silicon Valley's top investors, including Lightspeed, Shasta Ventures and Index Ventures. Customers include Lyft, Gainsight, and Okta.

To learn more, visit http://people.ai and follow us on follow us on Twitter @ppl_ai.