



# INTELLIGENCE FOR IMPACT: UNLOCKING AI VALUE IN SALES AND MARKETING FUNCTIONS IN MANUFACTURING

# INTRODUCTION

Two shifts are converging on the commercial functions of manufacturing.

**The first** is in how manufacturers make money. Selling a machine once and moving on is no longer enough. More companies are charging for uptime, output, or outcomes rather than a one-time transaction – subscription- and usage-based models that turn ‘customer relationship’ into something ongoing. It is no longer a sale followed by occasional service calls; it’s a continuous, data-driven relationship that has to be actively managed and renewed.

**The second** is in who the customer is. Manufacturing has traditionally run on B2B logic – a small number of large accounts sold to over long cycles. That’s changing. As manufacturers move closer to end users through direct channels, connected products, and platform partnerships, they’re increasingly operating in B2C and B2B2C territory too. A single company might now sell to a distributor, a dealer, and an individual end customer, sometimes for the same product line.



While manufacturing companies have spent decades engineering efficiency into their factories, they still rely on manual processes, human intuition, and disconnected data to run their commercial functions. For an industry that demands precision in everything it builds, the contrast is striking.

That gap is closing – and fast. AI is reshaping how manufacturing companies find customers, engage them, convert them, and retain them. For sales and marketing leaders in manufacturing, the question is no longer whether to invest in AI. It is where to start, what to prioritize, and how to capture value at scale.

## THE COMMERCIAL FUNCTION HAS A PRECISION PROBLEM

Most industrial manufacturing sales cycles are long, complex, and resource-intensive. Sales people spend considerable time prospecting manually, configuring products through multiple consultations, navigating multi-round commercial negotiations, and managing deal sign-offs that involve significant documentation. On the marketing side, teams struggle to produce personalized content at scale, measure campaign performance accurately, and deliver the kind of consultative, data-backed support that today’s B2B buyers expect.

These are not marginal inefficiencies. They compound across every stage of the funnel. A misaligned lead wastes a salesperson’s time. A poorly configured proposal triggers an additional round of consultations. A slow deal sign-off delays revenue.

When multiplied across thousands of interactions, the cumulative cost is substantial.

The fundamental problem is a lack of intelligence at each stage. Sales people rely on experience and judgment where they should have data. Marketing teams personalize at the segment level where they could personalize at the individual level. Commercial decisions that could be informed by real-time analytics are still driven by spreadsheets and instinct.

**AI changes the baseline.**

## TOP OF FUNNEL: SMARTER LEAD PRIORITIZATION

Not all leads are equal, but most sales teams treat them as if they are. Manual lead prioritization – based on account size, industry, or a salesperson's gut feeling – is both slow and inaccurate. The result is a misallocation of effort: time spent on low-conversion prospects while high-value opportunities receive insufficient attention.

AI-based lead scoring changes this dynamic by analyzing customer data, historical interactions, market signals, and behavioral patterns to assign conversion propensity scores at scale. The impact is measurable. This is the immediate promise of AI in sales: the same team, working the same hours, producing significantly better outcomes because they are focused on the right opportunities.



For a U.S. HVAC multinational, deploying an AI and machine learning-based lead scoring model enhanced customer conversion by **two percentage points**. Given the volume of leads a global manufacturing enterprise handles, two percentage points represent a material commercial gain - achieved not by hiring more salespeople, but by **deploying their time more precisely**.



## MID-FUNNEL: CONFIGURATION, CONSULTATION, AND CONVICTION

Converting a prospect into a customer in manufacturing is rarely a single interaction. It involves understanding complex requirements, configuring products or fleets to fit those requirements, building commercial conviction around value, and navigating pricing and financing decisions - each stage a potential source of friction.

AI can compress this process considerably. Generative AI-powered virtual sales assistants can handle a significant portion of the consultative burden, answering detailed product questions accurately and consistently, at any hour, without requiring a salesperson to be present.

Beyond consultation, AI supports smarter commercial negotiation. Frontline sales teams often lack visibility into optimal pricing, discount thresholds, or deal structures - leaving margin on the table or losing deals they could have closed. AI can provide real-time pricing and discounting recommendations based on customer attributes, conversion propensity, and risk profiles, giving salespeople the intelligence they need at the moment they need it.

The downstream effect is shorter sales cycles, fewer consultations, higher average deal values, and fewer deals lost to competitive pricing.



For a European luxury automotive manufacturer, a generative AI virtual vehicle sales assistant was piloted that ingested vehicle brochures, enriched the content, and enabled customers and dealer representatives to query specifications and configurations through a natural language interface.

**The next phase: a multilingual voice-enabled version.**



## PURCHASE AND ORDER MANAGEMENT: WHERE AI REMOVES THE FRICTION

For many manufacturing companies, particularly in chemicals, industrials, and distribution, the purchase stage involves significant operational complexity. Big volumes of orders arrive through email and other channels – each requiring verification, processing, and onboarding support. Manual handling at scale is time- and resource-intensive. The commercial implications of such

processes extend beyond cost savings. Faster order processing improves customer experience, reduces friction at a critical moment in the buying journey, and frees operations teams to focus on exception handling and relationship management rather than routine data entry.



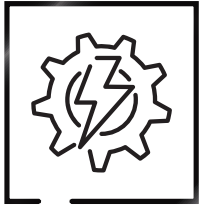
One chemical company processing 8 million email orders annually required more than 600 full-time equivalents (FTEs) to manage the volume. An optical character recognition-based system still required manual intervention for 90% of orders.

**The solution:** an AI-powered sales order automation platform **that achieved more than 90% touchless order processing**, with template-free customer onboarding that dramatically reduced onboarding time for new customers.

## POST-SALE: FORECASTING, CHANNEL ENABLEMENT, AND UPSELL INTELLIGENCE

The relationship with a manufacturing customer does not end with purchase. Ongoing service, upgrades, accessories, and spares represent a significant revenue opportunity - one that most companies underexploit because they lack the real-time intelligence to act on it.

AI-driven sales forecasting gives commercial teams the visibility they need to manage inventory, plan capacity, and prioritize account management efforts.



For an American electrical component distributor, an AI and machine learning sales forecasting model using time series analysis, random forest, and gradient boosting algorithms achieved approximately 90% forecast accuracy at the branch level for key accounts. Generative AI was also deployed to produce forecast summaries and commentary, making the outputs accessible to business users without data science expertise.

**The result: better material availability, reduced stockouts, and a more responsive supply chain.**

Channel and dealer networks present a parallel opportunity. Dealers are often the primary customer touchpoint for manufacturing companies, yet they frequently lack the tools, training, and real-time information to serve customers effectively.



For a multinational automotive major, a generative AI-powered chatbot was deployed for dealers to streamline access to complex operational manuals and product documentation.

**The outcome: a 30% improvement in dealer productivity and a 25% uplift in customer engagement. These numbers reflect something important – the impact of AI in manufacturing is not limited to direct sales teams. It extends through every commercial touchpoint in the ecosystem.**



# MARKETING IN MANUFACTURING: FROM BROADCAST TO PRECISION

Historically, marketing teams in manufacturing have operated at a relatively low level of personalization. Campaigns are designed for segments, not individuals. Content is produced in batches, not tailored to specific accounts. Performance measurement often lags behind campaign execution by weeks.

AI addresses each of these limitations directly. Generative AI enables marketing teams to create, repurpose, and localize content at scale - including product documentation, campaign

materials, and sales enablement assets - without proportionally increasing headcount. Predictive analytics enables hyper-targeted campaign planning, identifying which accounts show buying signals, which content formats resonate with specific personas, and which channels drive the highest conversion rates.

For commodity price forecasting - a critical input to marketing and pricing strategy in process industries - AI provides a further advantage.



For a European agrochemical company, a **machine learning-based commodity price forecasting tool** was deployed to assist product managers in pricing and inventory decisions, incorporating both micro and macro environmental indices and enabling scenario simulation across commodity lines.

The tool was subsequently marketed internally across product lines, demonstrating the value of AI-generated intelligence **as a shared organizational resource**.



## THE PRINCIPLE: BREADTH AND EMBEDDEDNESS, NOT ISOLATED PILOTS

Across these use cases, a consistent pattern emerges. AI delivers the greatest commercial impact when it is embedded across the funnel - not confined to a single use case or team. Lead scoring improves conversion. Virtual sales assistants reduce consultation cycles. Negotiation intelligence improves margins. Order automation reduces operational friction. Forecasting accuracy improves availability. Dealer enablement improves channel performance.

Each of these capabilities reinforces the others. Better lead scoring means higher-quality prospects entering the funnel. Better funnel

intelligence means higher conversion rates. Better forecasting means better availability to fulfill orders. The compounding effect of AI across commercial functions is significantly greater than the sum of its individual parts.

The imperative for manufacturing commercial leaders is therefore not to run an AI pilot and wait for results. It is to build a coherent AI roadmap that addresses each stage of the sales and marketing funnel, supported by the right data infrastructure, governance, and change management.

# WHAT SEPARATES AI LEADERS FROM LAGGARDS

The manufacturers pulling ahead with AI share a defining trait. They do not treat it as a technology project. They treat it as an opportunity to redesign how their business functions work.

That distinction matters. Followers run isolated pilots and measure success in proofs of concept. Leaders take an end-to-end view of the commercial value chain, then embed AI directly into the workflows that shape revenue and margin. The advantage comes from focus, not from the size of the budget or the number of experiments.

**The technology is no longer the hard part.** The harder questions are sharper. Where does AI create measurable commercial value? How do you scale it responsibly across functions without losing control of cost, data, and trust? And where does human judgment still carry more weight than any model?

**Leaders** answer these questions deliberately. They align every investment to a business outcome, build the data foundations to support it, and stay clear-eyed about what to automate and what to keep human. That clarity is what sets them apart.



## About the Author



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