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COMMERCIAL BRIEFING · NO. 05

Feast or Famine

Most small businesses lurch between too much work and too little, because they cannot see what is coming. A sales pipeline you can actually trust is the cure.

A Moor & Co commercial briefing

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POWERED BY 3DMAI

IN SHORT

Most small businesses run on a vague mental list of people who might buy one day. It is why the work arrives in lumps: a frantic stretch with no time to sell, followed by a worrying quiet once the big job ends. A sales pipeline breaks that cycle, but only if it tells you the truth rather than what you would like to hear. This briefing covers what a pipeline actually is, the handful of stages that matter, and how to run one so it gives you the thing most owners never have: a reliable view of what is coming, early enough to do something about it.

1. The list in your head is not a pipeline

Ask most small business owners about their sales pipeline and you get a tap on the temple: it is all up here. That works right up until it doesn't. A list in your head cannot be counted, cannot be forecast, and vanishes the moment you are busy delivering. So the selling stops while the work gets done, the work runs out, and the selling restarts from cold. That is the feast-and-famine cycle, and it is not the mark of a bad business. It is the mark of a business with no visible pipeline.

The cost is not just uneven income. Without a view of what is coming, you cannot plan: whether to take someone on, commit to stock or space, or turn work away. You are always reacting, never deciding.

2. What a pipeline actually is

A sales pipeline is simply a structured view of every live opportunity and where each one honestly stands, from first enquiry to signed customer. Its job is not to look tidy. Its job is to let you see, at a glance, what is in progress, what is stuck, and what is likely to land and when.

Done properly it does three things a mental list cannot. It shows you where to put your effort, so the best opportunities get the attention. It lets you forecast roughly what is coming, so you can plan around it. And it flags trouble early, while a deal can still be rescued, rather than after it has quietly gone cold. It is a management tool, not a tidy chart.

3. Pipeline or funnel: the one distinction worth knowing

The two words get used interchangeably, and they are not the same thing. A funnel describes the buyer's journey: how many people move from first hearing of you, through interest, to a decision, and how many fall away at each step. A pipeline describes your side of it: the specific opportunities you are working, and what you need to do next to move each one forward.

The funnel tells you *how many*. The pipeline tells you *what to do*. Both have their place, but for a small business actively chasing work, the pipeline is the one you live in day to day.

4. The stages that matter

You do not need a complicated system or the jargon that tends to come with it. You need a small number of stages that mean something for your business. For most, that is something close to: a new enquiry, not yet looked at; qualified, worth your time and roughly the right fit; in conversation, where you genuinely understand what they need; quote or proposal out; and closing, where it is down to terms and a decision. Then two end states: won, or lost with the reason recorded.

The exact names do not matter. What matters is that each stage marks a real change in the deal, not just the passage of time, and that everyone who sells uses the same definitions. Five or six stages is plenty. More than that and people stop keeping it up to date, which is the one thing a pipeline cannot survive.

5. The rule that makes a pipeline honest

Here is where most pipelines quietly fail. A deal should only move forward when something real has happened — a need confirmed, a budget acknowledged, the decision-maker engaged — not because it has been sitting there a while and you have a good feeling about it. Movement has to be earned.

Without that rule, two diseases set in. The first is optimism: everything drifts toward “nearly there”, and the pipeline fills with deals marked nearly closed that have not actually moved in months. The second is the zombie: dead opportunities nobody has had the heart to close off, clogging the view and flattering the total. A pipeline riddled with both is worse than no pipeline at all, because it lies to you with a straight face. The discipline of earned movement, and of clearing out the dead, is what turns a hopeful chart into a forecast you can trust.

A deal that has sat at “nearly closed” for three months is not a near-win. It is a question you have been avoiding. An honest pipeline forces the question.

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6. What an honest pipeline gives you back

Once the pipeline tells the truth, it becomes the most useful planning tool a small business has. You can see roughly what is likely to land and when, which means you can make decisions instead of reacting to them: whether you can afford to hire, whether to commit to that stock or that unit, whether you have the capacity to say yes to the next big enquiry or should hold off.

It also tells you something most owners never measure: your conversion rate. If you know that, say, one enquiry in four becomes a customer, you know exactly how much to put in the top to reach the number you want at the bottom. Selling stops being a mystery and becomes arithmetic. And that is the thread running through every one of these briefings: the pipeline tells you what is coming, your margins tell you whether it is worth having, and your cash position tells you whether you can survive the wait. Together, that is commercial control — the difference between running the business and being run by it.

7. A practical response

- **Define five or six stages** that fit how you actually win work. No more than that.
- **Write one line for each:** what must be true for a deal to enter this stage.
- **Clear out the zombies.** Once a month, close off anything that has not genuinely moved, with a reason recorded.
- **Track your conversion.** Count how many enquiries become customers, so you know how much to feed the top.
- **Review weekly, briefly.** Not to admire the chart, but to decide the next action on each live deal.
- **Be honest about close dates.** One date you actually believe is worth ten you are merely hoping for.

None of this needs expensive software or a sales department. It needs a handful of honest stages, a rule that movement is earned, and the discipline to look every week. That is enough to turn feast and famine into something you can see coming.

ABOUT MOOR & CO & 3DMAI

A pipeline is only useful when it tells you the truth. We help you build one that does.

Moor & Co is a commercial advisory for small business owners, built by someone who has run, scaled and exited real businesses. We help firms across North Staffordshire and South Cheshire turn a vague sense of what is out there into a clear, honest view of what is coming, so you can plan with confidence instead of lurching from one month to the next.

The numbers behind it run on **3DMAI**, our commercial intelligence platform for UK SMEs. Its forecasting tools turn your live opportunities and your real conversion rates into a realistic picture of the revenue ahead, on your own numbers and in plain English, for £19.99 a month. The free tools need no sign-up. If you would rather talk it through first, the discovery call is free and there is no commitment.

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ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This briefing is drawn from established sales-management practice rather than a single study. The principles it sets out — clearly defined stages, progression that is earned rather than assumed, and honest forecasting — are standard across professional selling and apply equally to a sole trader and a small sales team.
General guidance only — not financial or legal advice.