

FOR CEOS OF MANUFACTURERS & DISTRIBUTORS

The CEO's Guide to Talking to Your Own Data

9 questions worth asking — and what it takes to answer them.

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Most manufacturing leaders don't have a data problem.

They have a data silo problem.

ERP

Knows what you sold, what it cost, what's on the shelf, and who owes you money.

CRM

Knows who your customers are, which reps own them, and what's in the pipeline.

Marketing

Google Analytics, Google Ads, Meta, LinkedIn, your email tool — know where demand comes from and what it cost to create.

Each system answers part of the question. None of them answers the whole thing. And the questions that matter most to a CEO live in the gaps between them.

"Which customers generate the greatest gross income after sales & marketing costs?"

Needs the ERP for revenue and cost, the CRM for the sales effort, and marketing for what it cost to win them.

"Is this rep good for the business?"

Needs the CRM for activity and the ERP for the gross profit their deals actually produce.

"Is our marketing creating profitable revenue?"

Needs the ad platforms for spend and the ERP for what shipped — and at what margin.

When those systems don't talk to each other, most of us go looking for the answer in a spreadsheet — or a spreadsheet with an AI assistant helping with the analysis. But the AI inside each application can't talk to the other applications. The data is still siloed.

Exporting to Excel takes time, is extremely fragile, and never gives you a single source of truth. You just can't rely on the results.

But this has all changed.

Connected data plus engineered AI means you can now ask these questions in plain English and get answers grounded in your own numbers — in minutes, not weeks. The key is engineering the data and the AI, so your results are fast **and** accurate.

THE SCOREBOARD

One scoreboard: gross profit

When ERP, CRM, and marketing data are connected, five areas come into focus. Each one matters for the same reason: **gross profit**.

Revenue can hide problems. Gross profit — and the cash it turns into — can't.

LENS	THE QUESTION UNDERNEATH	WHERE THE ANSWER LIVES
Products	Which ones make money after everything?	ERP + Marketing
Customers	Which accounts are worth more than they cost?	ERP + CRM + Marketing
Sales people	Who brings in profitable revenue — not just revenue?	CRM + ERP + Marketing
Marketing	Which dollars turn into gross profit, not just leads?	Marketing + CRM + ERP
Inventory	Where is stock earning, and where is it just sitting?	ERP + CRM

QUESTIONS

09

Here are nine questions worth asking. Notice that every one of them needs at least two systems to answer. **Most need all three.**

START WITH QUESTION 01 OF 09 →

01 Where are we quietly destroying our margin?

Margin rarely disappears in one place. It leaks — a little at a time — between the list price and the money you actually keep.

Discounts and rebates. Increased freight rates that you absorbed. The cost of the payment terms you extended. Returns. The ad spend it took to win the order. The sales investment it took to close it.

Each one looks small on its own. Stacked up, they can take a “30% margin” product down to single digits.

ASK

Walk me from list price to actual gross profit for our top 50 products and top 50 customers. Where is the biggest leak — pricing, cost to serve, or marketing?



WHAT IT TAKES TO ANSWER

ERP

CRM

MARKETING

ERP pricing, invoice, freight, and returns data. CRM sales effort. Marketing spend tied back to the products and customers it actually sold.

THE DECISION IT UNLOCKS

A ranked list of leaks instead of a general worry about margin. You fix the biggest one first — and it usually isn't the one everyone has been arguing about.

→ This is the master question. Questions 3, 6, 7, and 8 each drill into a specific leak.

02 How can our inventory improve our cash and revenue?

Inventory fails in two directions at once. Too much of the wrong items ties up cash. Too little of the right items loses sales — and sometimes the customer.

Most companies have both problems at the same time, in the same warehouse. Or worse, in multiple warehouses with different transportation and storage costs.

ASK

Which items are we losing sales on because of stockouts, and which items have more than six months of supply on hand? What is the dollar value of each?



WHAT IT TAKES TO ANSWER

ERP**AI FORECAST****CRM****MARKETING**

ERP inventory, sales velocity, open purchase orders, and backorders. AI-forecasted sales, CRM pipeline, and open quotes to see the demand that's coming. Marketing data to see what you're promoting — because you don't want to invest in ads for something you can't ship.

THE DECISION IT UNLOCKS

You rebalance purchasing: buy more of what sells, stop buying what doesn't, and clear slow movers with targeted offers. Cash comes out of the slow movers. Revenue comes from never being out of the fast ones. And you optimize your marketing spend at the same time.

03 Which customers cost more to serve than they bring in?

Revenue is not profit. Your biggest customers are often not your most profitable ones.

Small orders. Expedites. Special packaging. Custom pricing. Slow payment. Frequent returns. Heavy rep and service time. None of it shows up on the sales report — but all of it comes out of gross profit.

ASK

Rank our customers by gross profit after discounts, freight, returns, and payment terms. Which large accounts fall to the bottom — and why?



WHAT IT TAKES TO ANSWER

ERP

CRM

MARKETING

ERP orders, pricing, freight, returns, and receivables. CRM rep activity, service cases, and quotes per order. Marketing acquisition cost for newer accounts.

THE DECISION IT UNLOCKS

Account-level strategy. Some customers need a price adjustment. Others need order minimums or different delivery terms. Small accounts may belong in a lower-cost channel. And the accounts that carry the business get protected and grown on purpose.

04 What will sales, demand, and cash look like over the next 90 days?

Most forecasts are last year plus a percentage — built in a spreadsheet, owned by one person, and disconnected from what customers are doing right now.

A useful 90-day view connects three things: what's already ordered (ERP), what's likely to close (CRM), and what demand is building (marketing — web traffic, inquiries, campaign response). Then it translates that into cash: what you'll need to buy, make, collect, and pay.

ASK

Based on open orders, pipeline, seasonality, and recent marketing activity, what should we expect for sales, demand by product family, and cash over the next 90 days? Where are we most likely to be wrong?



WHAT IT TAKES TO ANSWER

ERP

CRM

MARKETING

ERP order history, open orders, and payables/receivables. CRM pipeline with realistic close dates. Marketing leading indicators.

THE DECISION IT UNLOCKS

Purchasing, production, staffing, and cash planning built on a forecast you can check every week. And because you're comparing expected to actual, you see when you're off in time to correct it.

05 Where is cash trapped in our cash conversion cycle?

You can be profitable on paper and tight in the bank.

Your cash conversion cycle is simple: the days it takes to sell inventory, plus the days it takes to collect, minus the days you take to pay suppliers. Every day you take out of it is cash back in the business.

\$137K

One day of sales for a \$50M company — cash freed for every day you cut from the cycle.

DIO + DSO – DPO

Days to sell inventory, plus days to collect, minus days to pay suppliers.

ASK

What is our cash conversion cycle by product line and customer segment, and which change would free up the most cash the fastest?



WHAT IT TAKES TO ANSWER

ERP CRM

ERP receivables, payables, inventory, and order dates. CRM data on which customers — and which reps — negotiated which terms.

THE DECISION IT UNLOCKS

A focused working-capital plan instead of a general instruction to “improve cash flow.” Invoice faster. Process payments quickly on invoices sent. Renegotiate with specific suppliers. Create strategic terms for customers. Clear specific inventory.

06 Which sales reps discount to close — and which of them still bring in the most gross profit?

Discounting isn't automatically bad. Some reps discount and win large, loyal, profitable accounts. Others discount out of habit and give away margin on deals they would have won anyway.

The math is unforgiving.

3%

Discount on a product with a 25% margin...

12%

...removes 12% of the gross profit.

~14%

More volume needed just to make it back.

ASK

For each rep, show revenue and gross margin dollars — not just percentages — plus win rates and repeat purchase rate over the last 12 months. Who discounts heavily and still produces the most gross profit — and who doesn't?



WHAT IT TAKES TO ANSWER

CRM ERP

CRM opportunities, win rates, and activity. ERP invoiced price, cost, gross profit, and repeat orders. Neither system can answer this alone.

THE DECISION IT UNLOCKS

You coach and compensate on gross profit, not revenue. You set discount approval thresholds based on evidence. And you learn what your best discounters are doing right — and teach it to the rest of the team.

07 Did our latest price change help or hurt?

Price changes are usually judged by revenue. But revenue can rise while you quietly lose your best customers.

Volume can hold while a competitor picks off the accounts that matter most.

ASK

Since the price change, what happened to volume, gross profit, order frequency, and customer retention — by product, customer segment, and rep? Are we losing deals we used to win?



WHAT IT TAKES TO ANSWER

ERP**CRM****MARKETING**

ERP before-and-after sales and margin. CRM win/loss data and lost-deal reasons. Marketing data on whether inquiries and conversion rates changed.

THE DECISION IT UNLOCKS

Keep the change, roll it back selectively, or adjust by segment. And you build a repeatable way to test the next price change instead of guessing.

08 Which products are returned or reworked most often — and what is it costing our gross margin?

Returns and rework hit margin twice: the cost to fix the problem, and the capacity that could have produced something sellable.

Add freight in both directions, credits, and sometimes the customer relationship itself.

ASK

Which products, suppliers, production lines, and customers have the highest return and rework rates, and how much gross profit did that cost us over the last 12 months?



WHAT IT TAKES TO ANSWER

ERP

CRM

ERP returns, credits, work orders, scrap, and purchasing by supplier. CRM service cases and complaints.

THE DECISION IT UNLOCKS

You put quality dollars where gross profit is actually leaking — a supplier change, a spec fix, a process step, a training gap. And sometimes the answer is to stop selling a product into an application it wasn't built for.

09 Which customers are most at risk of leaving?

Customers rarely announce they're leaving. They drift.

Order frequency stretches. Order size shrinks. A product line goes quiet. They stop opening your emails and stop visiting your website. By the time the rep notices, the business has already moved.

ASK

Which of our top gross-profit customers have changed their buying pattern in the last 90 days — and what else changed? Service issues, rep coverage, marketing engagement?



WHAT IT TAKES TO ANSWER

ERP**CRM****MARKETING**

ERP order history and gross profit by account. CRM activity and service cases. Marketing engagement — email, web, and event data.

THE DECISION IT UNLOCKS

A save list ranked by gross profit at risk. An executive call, a fixed service issue, a coverage change — made while there's still a relationship to save. Keeping a customer is far cheaper than finding a new one.

Where to start

AI has changed what's possible. You can now ask questions like these in plain English and get answers in seconds — but only if the AI can see the whole picture, and the picture is clear.

AI pointed at a single system gives you that system's answer — just faster. That's not the breakthrough.

The breakthrough is connecting ERP, CRM, and marketing into one view of the business, and then putting AI on top of it. Here's how to get there.

1 Pick the three questions that matter most this year.

Don't start with all nine. Start with what's costing you the most. If margin is shrinking, start with Question 1. If cash is tight, Questions 5 and 2. If growth has stalled, Questions 6 and 9.

2 Connect your systems before you add AI.

Bring ERP, CRM, and marketing data into one model. The hard part isn't the technology — it's the matching. The same customer has to be recognized in the CRM and the ERP. The same product has to be recognized in your ad platform and your item master. Freight, returns, and ad spend have to be tied to the orders they belong to. Get that right once, and every question gets easier.

3 Agree on one definition of gross profit.

What's in it — freight, rebates, returns, commissions, marketing? Decide once, and write it down. Otherwise finance, sales, and operations will each bring a different number to the same meeting.

4 Keep your systems — they're fine. Focus on the data.

It's not the system, it's the data. Your systems are doing their job. The value is in the layer on top that connects them to everything else.

5 Then put AI on top — and ask follow-up questions.

Once AI can speak to an organized data layer sitting on top of your systems, you can keep asking:

Why did gross margin fall in March?



Which customers drove most of the decline?



Was it pricing, product mix, freight, or returns?



Each answer should be grounded in your live data, with the numbers behind it visible so your controller can check the work.

6 Measure expected versus actual.

Every decision is a prediction — a price change, an inventory buy, a campaign. Write down what you expect, then ask the same question 30, 60, and 90 days later. That's how AI becomes a management system instead of a novelty.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The manufacturers that win the next few years won't be the ones with the most data. They already have it.

They'll be the ones who connect it — and learn to ask it better questions.

Not more data. Not more dashboards.

**Better questions.
Clearer answers.
Smarter decisions.**

HighBeam Analytics provides the advisory knowledge. **InsightQ™** connects ERP, CRM, and marketing data for manufacturers and distributors, and puts AI to work the way it was designed to.

If you'd like to see what these nine questions look like against your own numbers, I'm happy to walk through it.

Call us at 858-735-5928

highbeamanalytics.com