Lead Qualification –
Essential, not Optional

At the risk of being politically incorrect, all sales leads are not created equal. A lead from someone who has visited your Web site, downloaded literature, and requested a sales call demands more attention than a magazine bonus leads where the individual has not even expressed interest in your company. Having a process that recognizes and acts on these differences can have a significant impact on your sales team's ability to convert opportunities into closed sales.

Junk or gold?
On average, only a small percentage of leads represent near-term sale opportunities. This means that your reps need to invest time following up on 10 to 15 leads for every 1 that has legitimate potential. What happens more often than not is that—with these low odds—lead follow-up falls to the bottom of the priority list and you lose the 1 true opportunity. This is especially true for independent reps or distributors where you're competing for attention with their other principals. However, if—through lead qualification—you can improve this ratio and you clearly communicate that you are making this extra effort, you have a much better chance of your leads rising to the top of their priority list.

Qualified vs. non-qualified—Separation without anxiety
So how do you incorporate lead qualification into your lead management process?

- Identify your qualifiers—2 to 4 questions that can be used to determine whether a prospect needs the immediate attention of your sales force and represents a good prospect for your company. This could be as simple as asking whether they'd like to speak with a sales rep or as complicated as asking questions about their particular applications or needs.
- Capture this information as early in the process as possible by reengineering your data gathering processes. For example, add these qualifiers to your web site lead capture page or inbound 800 number script. If the information is not available up front—usually the case with magazine leads—call the prospect to obtain it.
- Develop qualification rules that clearly specify when a lead should and should not be sent to the field based on the qualifiers you were able to gather and the nature/source of the lead. Share these rules with your sales team so they buy into the process and actively participate in its ongoing improvement and refinement.

There's gold in that thar junk
So what about those leads that don't qualify to go to the field? They should receive attention as well—just not priority attention.
It's certainly appropriate to send them a fulfillment packet—preferably including their local rep's name and contact information—so they can contact you if they have a real need. And you should also keep them in your prospect database so they can receive ongoing communications. We also recommend that sales reps scan their non-qualified leads weekly for ones that may warrant additional attention, e.g., to get a foot in the door or start building a relationship at a company with significant potential.

In summary, lead qualification is about effective resource management—focusing the valuable time of your sales team on those opportunities with the highest potential. Make it an integral part of your sales processes.