

How Can Marketing Help Beleaguered Sales Professionals?

The recent economic downturn has made most sales professionals wonder what they can do differently to even come close to making their numbers.

Of course, there's no easy answer. *The changes confronting sales professionals today are even more pronounced than they are for the rest of us.* In our own business, we've seen a dramatic turn in what customers want and expect from their sales and relationship manager partners.

To be true and valued partners to sales teams, we need to understand a bit more about these changes so we can give sales professionals useful information, delivered in the right manner at the right time.

The Sea Change

I personally was schooled in the virtues of consultative selling. Bottom line: it seemed to work and it respected clients. One would present a great capability statement that stimulated interest, explore needs, and advance with options to engage the prospect. If the process was managed correctly, prospects seemed to almost close the deals for you. Those principles still have some merit, but today they leave sales professionals far short of success.

Now, customers are under siege. They have no time, too many priorities, multiple tasks to juggle, and too many vendors knocking at their door. No potential customer has time to spend sharing all her needs with salespeople armed only with questions. There is little time for customers and

prospects to even think about their landscape of needs. Salespeople who think they can call a customer and only have a conversation to explore needs, had better re-think that strategy.

This is a sea change in the context of business development compared to the way things used to be. We've found there are also differences by generation -- younger generations, having grown up in the rapid pace of the internet, simply may not be of a mindset to indulge sales professionals and meet with them for that casual or informal get-together in ways other generations might have. Our perspective is that sales associations based principally on personal relationships are far more vulnerable than ever before.

What customers want is for salespeople to cut through the clutter of their lives in business.

"Tell me something new. Tell me something I don't know." "Give me ideas that help my business. Don't ask me what I need -- understand my situation and open my eyes to something valuable."

Provocative Selling

So, salespeople need to think more about taking the chance on what ideas they might present to customers. They also must learn more about customers and their businesses than ever before, so they can offer ideas out of the starting gate that could add value. Customers and prospects don't want to have their needs explored; they want to be provoked with new ideas.

Furthermore, customers want new ideas within the business context in which they operate. New ideas that might be advanced to customers in a given industry not only need to take into account the customer's business, but also how he or she wants to buy, and how he or she defines value in the relationship and in the company's products and services. This broader perspective suggests that salespeople need reliable data and insights on how to think about their customer segments, and how to adjust and advance the company's value proposition.

In other words, sales professionals need to start thinking a lot more like marketers!

So, what can marketers do to help?

Our research at Hansa for one client demonstrated that advancing the company's strategy of building deep, meaningful customer partnerships simply would not work with some customer segments. Some segments wanted only to buy on a commodity level, while others felt a lack of exceptional delivery on fundamentals.

So, for some key target segments, our client had to forget about adding compelling, value-add ideas;

instead they needed to focus on how to enhance the basic delivery of services and products. For these segments, the client had to earn the right to offer new ideas before advancing to a more value-add relationship. Jumping to that place prematurely would have been counterproductive, perhaps even destructive.

Yet, for customers in another segment, who felt they were getting good value and quality, the client needed to bring valuable ideas into any potential partnership. These customers were truly looking for a trusted advisor. The former segment was not. The sales professional in this situation absolutely could not treat all customers the same and needed ammunition to understand which customers were in which segment and what motivated them.

This brings us to a crucial point. Relationship management is a critical touch point in the customer experience. There must be consistency between how customer relationship managers interact with clients and the customer and brand strategy of the organization.

Often the charter to sales teams seems to be, "Here's the product/service -- go get 'em." Now more than ever, there needs to be careful thought given to different customer segments, their different needs, the value propositions for those segments, and how to put forward the company's products and services in ways that garner attention and interest.

The customer experience is not something that starts with product use. It starts with communications and customer exposure to initial

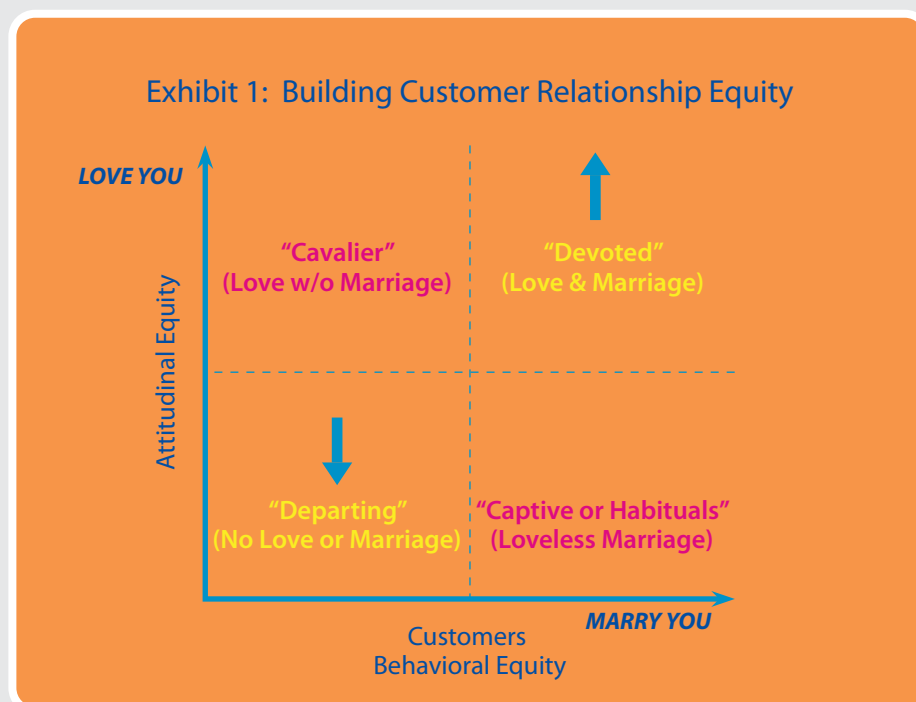
touch points like sales professionals and relationship managers. And the character of these relationships can't always be successfully determined by asking intelligent questions.

Sales professionals need to know new ways to differentiate right off the bat. Now, the way they sell differentiates as much as what they sell. The way one sells involves an "and/both" dilemma; they need to be able to tune in acutely to customer business situations and needs, yet advance ideas that provoke the customer to think outside the boundaries of their own organization. Fundamental to managing this dilemma is having solid insight into what motivates customers, how customers differ, and how the brand can be delivered among these segments.

Basically the challenge for salespeople is to get customers to "Love Them" and "Marry Them," as illustrated in the following exhibit.

Getting customers to buy, but not building an attitudinal bond (Love you) may work in the short term or for the one-time sale, but it leaves the company and the account relationship vulnerable to competitive in-roads. There is no deep or enduring bond between the company and the customer. If the company makes a mistake, or a competitor comes along with a promotional offer, the customer can easily jump ship. (Note: While we have discussed the need to get customers to "love" and "marry" the sales rep, it is paramount to ensure that these same feelings also extend beyond the sales rep relationship to the company as a whole.)

Conversely, getting customers to love you but not buy suggests that something is amiss – they might really like a particular sales rep, but see barriers in the purchase or use of your products. Maybe they are constrained, too, by the roles of other influencers or decision makers in their



organizations. Building true loyalty and deeper customer relationships happens when customers rate you high on attitudinal dimensions and high on behavior dimensions (behavioral intent at a minimum, actual behavior ideally). Sales professionals will succeed if they build both attitudinal and behavioral equity in their customer and prospect relationships.

In summary, the new sales paradigm requires that marketing partner with sales professionals to:

1. **Recognize the sea change in customer and prospect business context.**
2. **Help business development become more provocative in sales conversations** - moving beyond simply exploring needs to offering stimulating, business-valuable ideas.
3. **Understand customer segments and their differences, how to identify them, what motivates them, and how to sell to different segments** – and be certain to communicate this to your sales group clearly and frequently.
4. **Acquire customer insights based on solid data that can be translated into practical sales and relationship management strategies** – the simpler the better.

Hansa provides a full range of qualitative and quantitative research services. Our experienced research and consulting team, including PhD-level statisticians, uses innovative, data-driven methodologies tailored to our clients' research needs.

We pride ourselves on our ability to truly understand the voice of the customer and translate that voice into winning strategies for brand development, marketing communications, customer relationship enhancement, and product/service innovation.