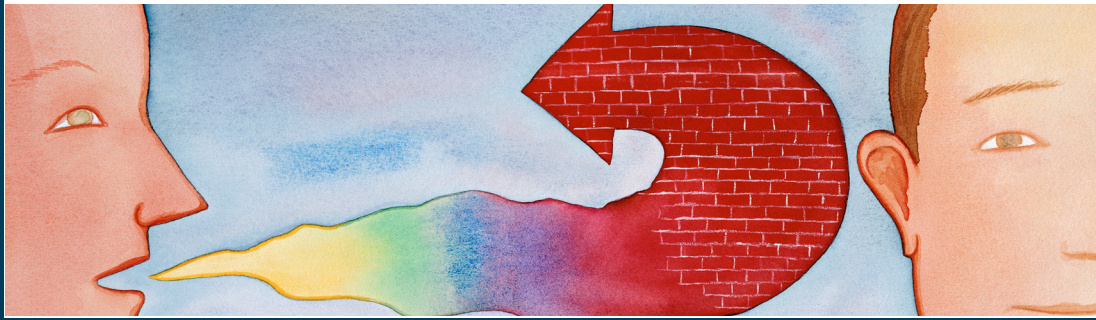


Your Customer Doesn't Care About Your Product



You are very proud of your product. By all rights you should be. You have worked as hard as you possibly can to make it the best on the market. Sadly, however, no matter how good it is, your potential customers don't care. They have their own problems, and admiring your product for its cleverness is not on the list. While most manufacturers seem to disagree, the fact is that B2B customers buy solutions, not products.

99.9% of the companies in business today think that the way to sell product is to put together piles of brochures and megabytes of PowerPoints, all centered on talking about their product and its features. Prove that each and every feature is better than the competition. That is not, however, the way the sales cycle works.

The Steps a Buyer takes

We used to think that the first step of the buying cycle was "awareness"; making sure that the potential customer has heard of your product and its benefits. We now know that the cycle starts well before that. In fact, your best sales people know that it starts before the prospect even realizes they have a need. The issue is that a buyer who has not yet recognized a need is absolutely turned off by a product pitch. Instead, we need to help establish that need and assist with the evaluation of options before product even enters the picture. The key part of the sales cycle is helping the prospect formulate their goals and establish their options for a solution. With so many markets approaching commodity status, a key differentiator for your company is not just what you sell, but how you sell it. Buyers want to be approached, not on the basis of your product's merits, but instead on the issues they need to resolve.

The Marketing / Sales Disconnect

Your top salespeople know how to do this instinctively. They use a consultative sales technique to first raise awareness of common industry problems and instill a "need". Only late in the process does the discussion turn to product. Unfortunately, in most companies, these key salespeople are rowing their own boat during the initial consultative portion of the process. The typical marketing collateral is of absolutely no value in this stage. In fact, it can cause a good deal of harm if used, since it destroys the consultant relationship and reduces the situation to "just another sales call".

This all too typical situation causes a number of key problems. First, while your top 10% salespeople may be able to work in this environment, the second and third tier team rarely is. If you sell through an indirect channel, odds are you may be particularly impacted. The end result is most often late entry into project opportunities when the customer has already locked down what features are important and which ones are not. That translates to lost sales and lower profits while you slug it out during the bidding process.

Second, you have totally lost control over your marketing message since your Salesforce is making it up as they go along. Clearly, this can create all sorts of problems, but perhaps the biggest is the lost opportunity to consistently tell the real story; the one that differentiates you from your competition.

Finally, there is the issue of Marketing. If they are focused on producing product centric information that the prospect has no need for until late in the cycle, where is the ROI on their efforts? In many companies, a blind survey of the Salesforce will uncover a lack of respect for Marketing's help in the sales process, and often an opinion that the brochures and PowerPoints are not useful. If the Marketing team is more comfortable with the development process than they are with the sales process, and they are more knowledgeable of product features than they are customer problems, this is the outcome we should expect.

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The Questions You Should Ask

“What are my target markets?”

If you are going to help your Salesperson understand customer problems, you will need to segment these buyers into groups that share common concerns. You can segment them in a variety of ways, but for most B2B markets, vertical segments (by industry) are the easiest to understand, analyze, and ultimately reach with your message. So, before you can develop tools to support the sales effort, Management needs to decide which markets will yield the quickest results and therefore deserve Marketing's focus and resources.

“What key issues do these buyers care about?”

Does your Salesforce have a ready reference of typical problems that buyers have? If you are a company with an existing product, the best source of these issues would be the upper tier of your sales force. Companies just entering the market will (hopefully) have surveyed customers directly prior to starting product development to understand the problems that represent an opportunity. If not, now is the time. In any case, a team effort will be required to catalog the issues by market.

“How can my solution help?”

Your sales channel needs to be able to link these buyer issues to the solutions your company has to offer. Is there a clear path for a sales person to get the information needed to make the connection? Likely, your best salespeople know the answers, but what about the rest?

“How important is a solution to this problem?”

Not all solutions to a problem have an ROI. The ones that do however, have a significant advantage that needs to have visibility. If a buyer needs help pulling the value proposition together, is your Salesforce positioned to help?

“How can I make the buyer feel comfortable that my solution is the right one?”

The Salesforce needs to be able to substantiate that the proposed solution is in fact the best available. To do that, they need customer case studies, testimonials, applicable research into the customer problems, and friendly references. How much time does your Salesforce spend pulling that type of information together?

“Is my Marketing collateral based on the sales cycle and these buyer issues?”

After you think through the first five questions, ask yourself this one. Is Marketing helping the Salesforce sell or just documenting the product for Engineering? If it's the latter, what would it do to your bottom line to start spending marketing dollars on things that matter to the buyer?

Why a Consultant?

Marketing is a very important part of the business process. Your team needs to be able to understand the customer well enough to guide Engineering with the development of differentiated products and to build the messaging to help the world understand those differences. In so many cases, however, Marketing has lost its way. They are caught in a world of “gee wiz” technology and “feeds and speeds” for its own sake. Breaking out of that culture is difficult indeed, and often can only be done with the help of an outsider. There are a clear set of steps that need to be taken, starting with a clarification of the company's sales goals and Marketing's role in that activity. The process continues with the development of a list of pain points for each target market, a listing of the solutions you have that will help, and the value a solution will bring to the buyer. What a consultant brings to this process is an orderly proven approach, and the ability to coordinate change.

Why Phare?

Phare is in a unique position. With significant expertise in high tech product development, product marketing, and senior level management, we see all sides of the issue. The world is full of technical consultants that you would never let near one of your customers. There are plenty of marketing experts that do not understand the technology or development process. There are an abundance of management consultants that do not understand the quest for gross margin starts with a differentiated product and sales approach.

We get it, and we are ready to be your partner in successfully solving some of the most difficult challenges of your career. Our work is guaranteed to meet your satisfaction.