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OUT IN A SEA OF SAMENESS

*SIMON KELLY, PAUL JOHNSTON and
STACEY DANHEISER consider how to
differentiate yourself from competitors*

When your customers are swimming in a sea of sameness, can you save them from drowning?

We became interested in how differentiated companies were in their marketing communications because credible research we found while writing our book, *Value-ology: Aligning Sales and Marketing to Shape and Deliver Profitable Value Propositions*, pointed to customers typically being 60% of the way through the buying process before they contact a salesperson (CEB research) at which time 67% of the customers have a clear picture of the solution they want (Sirius Decisions).

The fact that the first 60% of the sales cycle is now spent interacting with company marketing communications through internet searches, company web sites, Twitter feeds and the like, places an extra onus on marketing to make it clear to customers why their organisation is better and different from competitors in ways that have relevance for those customers. We suspected that typical company marketing communications were

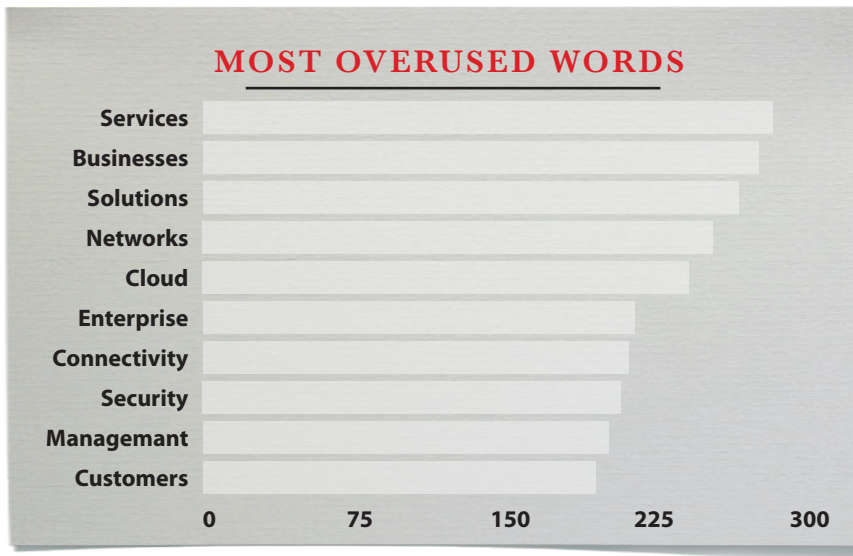
not providing relevant value propositions, as 94% of customers claimed to have disengaged with organisations because they were being sent irrelevant content that gave them no value (CEB research). We knew that for B2B organisations, this lack of clear differentiation was having a telling effect on sales success – as 58% of sales deals end in no deal because the customer has not been convinced of the value in moving from the status quo (Qyidian Sales Execution research).

Against this backdrop, we set out to explore for ourselves how well-differentiated organisations are in their marketing communications. The main thing we were interested in finding out was how easy companies are making it for customers to make informed choices based on what was being communicated to them.

EVERYONE TELLS BUYERS THE SAME STORY

Our research shows that B2B organisations are hell bent on telling the same story.

We began our research by focusing on the telecommunications sector, as we had a lot of experience there. We analysed the websites >



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◀ and Twitter feeds of the top 30 global players in the sector and found that all the companies were effectively telling their potential customers

they are no different from their competitors.

You can see some of the top takeaways from our research in our whitepaper, *Lost in a Sea of Sameness* at www.shakemktg.com. We have performed similar research for datacentres and UK Universities, and the results are no different.

1. GENERIC BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY CLAIMS DOMINATE MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

Of the top 10 most frequently used words, generic terms such as “services”, “businesses” and “solutions” make up 60%, while generic technology terms such as “networks”, “cloud” and “security” make up the remaining 40%. None of the most frequently used terms relate to customer needs or benefits. They are common descriptors of products, technology and business terms, which leaves the onus on the buyer to decipher why they should care and what’s in it for them.

Considering that 58% of IT purchase decisions are now being made outside the IT department, this language is IT-centric and not reaching the executive or business decision-maker. What appears to be happening here is reflected in a sales view expressed by Greg, a consultancy owner and former telecoms and IT sales VP:

“Marketing takes a very much inside-out view of the world. Basically, their approach is: ‘I’ve got some products, or I’ve got a new thing in my portfolio? How can I present that to the customer...?’ And quite often that is very ‘me too’ in terms of how they position and present that in the market.”

2. COMPANIES TALK TOO MUCH ABOUT THEMSELVES RATHER THAN THE CUSTOMER

Many of the words and themes we found are all about the telecommunications company. In other words, there was heavy use of “we” versus “you” phrases. We found that each supplier said virtually the same thing about the size and reach of their network and their end-to-end solutions.

Here’s what Jeff, a managing director, at a global telco, had observed in his own organisation:

“So, our value proposition pretty much reverts to ‘we’ve got this many locations in so many countries, this many people, this many installations, this many...’ You know, it’s all very much about ‘me and my company and our products’. I think the majority of potential customers would be sitting there thinking, ‘so what?’ to themselves.”

3. TOO MANY GENERIC BUSINESS CLAIMS ARE MADE WITH NO SUPPORT

While most companies make some claims to be able to affect the business performance of their customers, we found that the claims were generic and unsupported. For example, we saw many promises to “transform” or “accelerate” the customer’s business. Underneath this veneer, however, it is unclear how the supplier will help take the customer from where they are today to where they want to be. The answer is simply to “buy our products” to achieve massive growth and transformation. But without real proof points or quantified results being shared, the customer is left wondering will this solution really help me?

WHY DO THEY SOUND THE SAME?

We found that herd instinct, which can be defined as, “characterised by a lack of individual decision-making or thoughtfulness, causing people to think and act in the same way as the majority of those around them,” is prevalent throughout various industries and having a big impact on how companies are communicating their value within their industry sector.

Perhaps companies think this is the safest route to go? When everyone else is communicating in a similar way, it’s easier to justify the approach internally and gain approval. After all, who can argue with the “popular” way to explain your product? Informal discussions with sales and marketing professionals offer other potential explanations. For example, Lorri, VP of marcoms at a US telco, told us that when she was involved in a company acquisition, there was a need to get a new website up fast, so using other competitor websites as a benchmark for what to say was the quick and easy fix. Herbert, a former sales VP at a global telco pointed to the all too common practice of hiring people from the same industry.

The problem with this method is that if you can't differentiate your offer to a customer, they will be forced to choose the vendor with the lowest price. Imagine if you put yourself in the shoes of the customer in any of the three sectors we have researched to date. How can the customer possibly make an informed choice in this bland sea of sameness? Many are making a choice to do nothing.

Perhaps companies want to take the easy (ineffective) route rather than the less travelled (impactful) route. It takes a lot of work to set up a feedback loop and constantly check in with your customers about what's working and what's not. And it may be easier to just use the same industry jargon as your competitors. But in the end, this results in customer disconnectedness, and wasted time and energy.

We've found that most organisations are not putting emphasis on creating value for customers simply because they don't understand how to do it. Fornaise Group found that 83% of marketers don't know how to develop or implement a value proposition. That's a particular problem when only 55% of salespeople are meeting or exceeding quota (Miller Heiman). And the primary reason cited for missing their number is a failure to communicate value to the customer successfully.

DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

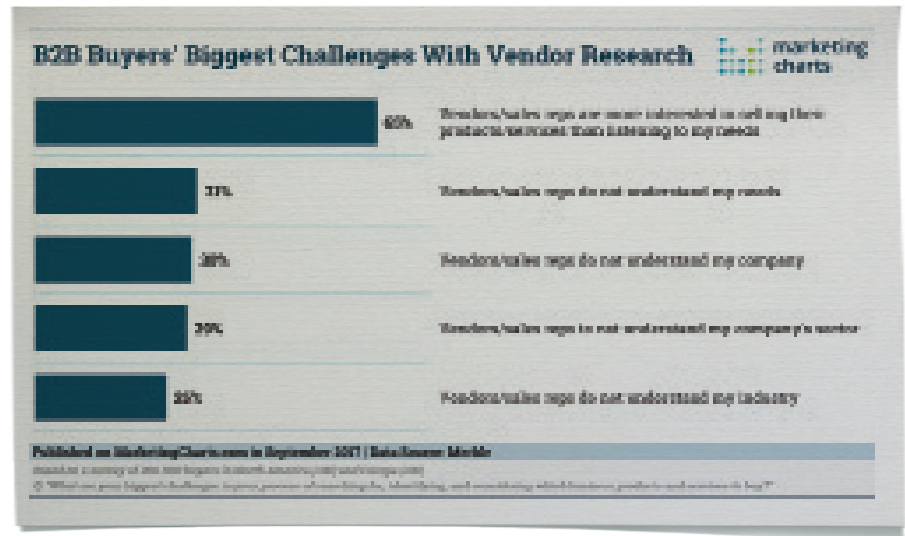
We suggest that if customers are swimming in a sea of sameness, then salespeople must be selling in a sea of sameness too, which of course places any sales professional in a challenging position. On the one hand, they have responsibility for selling-in the company's offer; on the other, they have to take on the objections, criticisms and weaknesses in the offer identified by the customer.

The company that does the best job in terms of communicating their value to customers wins. But this process must start by understanding what your customer values in the first place, then quantifying it in a way that resonates with them. The only sure way to achieve this is by finding out the sources of offer differentiation in and from sales conversations with customers.

Here are three steps sales professionals can take to get into what their customers value:

Step 1: Change your approach

When we asked marketing and sales leaders why they believe organisations are doing a poor job of differentiating themselves, the universal answer we got was "laziness." This is not to suggest that marketing and sales professionals aren't working hard, but rather that they are choosing to stick with



what they know, despite the fact that the B2B buying journey continues to grow more complex.

An added challenge for sales professionals is the increasing use by buyers of web-based information in sourcing decisions. In the past, sales may have paid little attention to their company websites and other marketing communications. Now, they can't afford to ignore them because research suggests that 67% of the buyer's journey is now done digitally (Sirius Decisions). This means that if your digital marketing communications don't resonate with the value sought by your customers, you will still be disqualified despite your best efforts.

Further, DemandBase recently surveyed 250 B2B

executive buyers and found that:

- 65% are going the route of having formal buying groups or committees to evaluate purchases
- 75% are spending more time researching purchase decisions
- 73% are using more sources to research and evaluate purchases, such as peers and colleague recommendations, industry experts, analysts and influencers and review websites.

The B2B buying landscape is shifting, and sales professionals must commit to changing their approach to be successful in this new environment.

Step 2: Listen

Suppliers need to ask themselves if they are really listening to what their buyers are saying. According to Merkle's recent research, B2B buyers want help solving their problems – but what they are getting is more product pitches (see bar chart above).

In other words, sellers are not taking the time to listen to what the customer needs before jumping to a solution. So, if your company marketing is ➤

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Stacey Danheiser, Simon Kelly and **Paul Johnson** are co-authors of *Value-Ology: Aligning Sales and Marketing to Shape and Deliver Profitable Value Propositions*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017 and reviewed in *Winning Edge* No1 2018.



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leaving the customer swimming in a sea of sameness, then a product pitch will only increase their chances of drowning. If you take time to understand their problem and explain how you alone can fix it, you can help your customer swim towards your island of uniqueness.

3. Partner with marketing

Feedback from sales conversations back to marketing and the broader organisation is ever more crucial.

Robson, president of a global telco, told us that there needs to be a continuous learning loop from the field back into the organisation about what is and isn't working, and crucially about what's important to customers: "Informing the organisation to shake the proposition, so they can be more successful in the field".

By "shake the proposition" he means that, by taking on board feedback, a company can re-shape its offers to be more in line with customers value, allowing them to stand out and sell more.

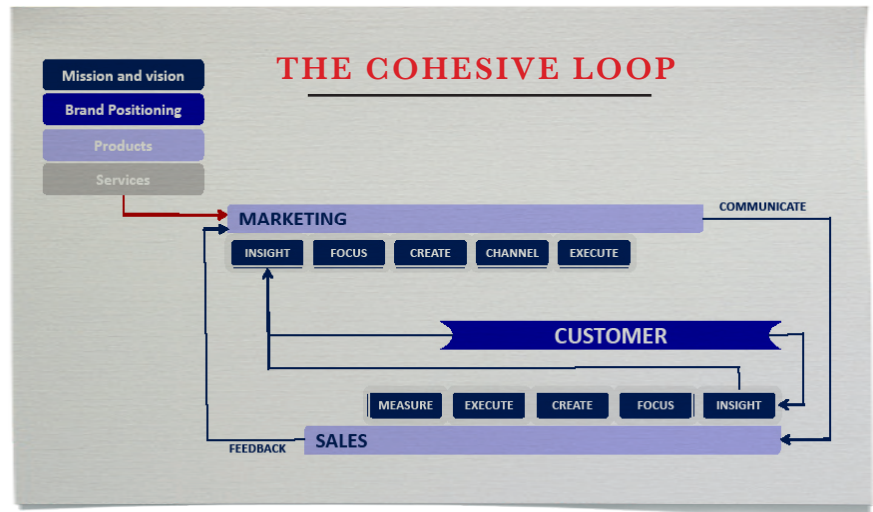
We call this a cohesive loop between marketing and sales, and in the concluding chapter of *Value-Ology*, we speculate that such cohesion could be the new competitive advantage.

THE COHESIVE LOOP: A PERPETUAL LEARNING CYCLE

From the organisation's standpoint, cohesion is achieved by understanding your customers so well that you are able to lead them, in a frictionless way, to a solution that only you can provide, by uniting sales and marketing in the delivery of value at each stage of your customer's journey.

This model recognises that, although the organisation's vision, mission, strategy and value proposition may have come from the marketing function, nothing has really happened until dialogue with the customer starts. In a world where you have created "cohesive advantage", marketing will have had the good sense to engage customers and sales in helping to shape these core characteristics.

If you have done this then there is likely to be better buy-in from sales as you take your value propositions back out to the market. The customer should recognise the value you are promising to deliver because you based your propositions on what they told you was important. This model is a continuous loop taking feedback from every part of



“the field” in the shape of customers, sales and, ultimately, service people.

Our sea of sameness research suggests that marketing does not appear to be providing relevant and distinct value propositions to customers, so sales has a heightened role in driving for better cohesion with marketing, and by presenting a regular flow of dialogue back from customer conversations.

If your conversations are just about marketing tactics not working, sales not executing against leads, or the need for more marketing events, you need to change the dialogue towards what customers value. If you can do this to “shake your proposition” to look more like what the customer values, you are likely to position yourself as a powerful and knowledgeable partner.

A QUESTION OF COMPETENCE?

Our strong hunch is that there is a personal competence issue at play here. After all, it's people who write the marketing communications and have the customer conversations that are leaving the customer swimming in a sea of sameness.

CAN YOU HELP?

We are currently conducting research to try to answer the question: “What competencies, attitudes and behaviours are required to enable the development of competitive differentiation, to help organisations swim away from the sea of sameness?” We are interviewing sales and marketing professionals to get their take on this. If you would like to take part in this research, please email Simon Kelly at simon.kelly@york.ac.uk. You can download the “sea of sameness” whitepapers at www.shakemktg.com