

ELEVATING SALES: UP, UP AND AWAY!

STACEY DANHEISER describes three ways to boost the sales experience and uncover customer value

Long gone are the days when buyers had to wait to gain information about a product or service from their salesperson. In fact, according to Gartner Research, today's B2B customers spend 45% of their time researching solutions independently – both online and offline – and only 17% of their time meeting with potential vendors. This means your prospective customers are sifting through copious amounts of information – from websites, to peer reviews, to articles – to understand their problem better, get a feel for possible solutions out there and, in some cases, fully decide what they want, before reaching out to a vendor to place their order.

It doesn't matter what you sell, the fact is that today's B2B buyers are faced with an enormous amount of choice. Take all of the marketing technology "solutions" as an example. In 2011, there were roughly 150 different suppliers – from advertising platforms to email marketing automation to data management. In 2018, that number ballooned to around 7,000 different options (source: Chiefmartec.com).

But while more options may seem to create opportunities and choices for buyers, they also present customers with a major problem – choice overload. As Sheena Iyenger addresses in a recent Ted Talk, as consumers we like to be presented with a lot of options, but too many choices lead us to become quickly overwhelmed when it comes to making a decision, which makes us more likely to:

- Delay our choice, even if it's in our best interest
- Make poorer decisions
- Choose things that make us less satisfied.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of your B2B customers. While searching for a solution, your customers are inundated with information – often

receiving the exact same story and promises from every vendor in the industry. When every company sounds the same, your customers are left utterly confused as to which solution will best meet their needs. They may just avoid making a decision (i.e. by continuing with the status quo), choose the one with the lowest price or, worse, choose a solution that is inadequate or ill-matched to their situation.

CUSTOMERS WANT VALUE

Before we get into how to uncover customer value, let's define what value is.

In my co-authored book, *Value-Ology: Aligning Sales and Marketing to Shape and Deliver Profitable Customer Value Propositions* (Kelly, Johnston, Danheiser, 2017), we suggest:

Value = relevant and distinct benefit - (minus) total cost of ownership

Simply put, value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. While you can speculate on the possible value your solution may provide, your customer can only ever decide if the benefit they are being promised is worth paying for.

Because value can mean different things to different people, even within the same company or department, it's critical to "walk in your customer's shoes" before pitching a product or service. If you don't, you may end up proposing a solution based on your assumptions of what matters to the customer, rather than on reliable information.

Merkle recently surveyed B2B buyers to understand what their greatest frustrations are during the buying process. What it found is that 65% of respondents say, "Vendors/sales reps are more interested in selling their products/services than listening to my needs."

The key to connecting with potential buyers is first to understand that the only reason they are willing to take a call or meet with you is to

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◀ discuss how you can solve their problem. This involves listening to customers to truly understand their needs, their goals, and potential challenges they are facing, before pitching a solution.

The question isn't "What product can I sell to my customer?" but rather, "What problem can I help my customer solve?"

This seems like a straightforward question, but many companies cannot answer it. This is evidenced by the fact that most companies think their unique selling proposition (USP) has everything to do with *what* their product is, and nothing to do with *why* a customer would want to buy it in the first place. Things like "256GB of storage" and "over 60 integrated solutions" don't explain to a potential customer what value they will get from using your product or service.

Take a look at most marketing and sales collateral out there and you'll see that it's littered with product-centric jargon and company-focused messages. Even customer case studies – which by definition should explain a specific customer problem, describe the solution and the results achieved – often only provide surface-level benefits delivered to the customer. But platitudes such as "improved customer experience" or "significant cost savings" only leave the customer wondering by how much? And will it work for my company?

UNEARTH CUSTOMER VALUE

Discovering what your customers value isn't nearly as simple as asking them. Often, they may not be able to express clearly and precisely what value they would like to get from using a product or service such as yours. For example, if you sell an accounting software package, your prospect may say, "I want to spend less time manually following up on outstanding invoices." But the real value they seek is to free up their time from mundane tasks (like following up on invoices) to work on more meaningful projects that will ultimately help them enhance their career and get promoted.

To uncover customer value and boost sales, consider implementing these three ideas:

IDEA 1: RETHINK YOUR SALESPERSON ROLE

There's a shift happening in the role of the salesperson today. Yes, you are expected to be an expert in what you're selling and what's happening in your industry, but you're also expected to be competent about your customer, how they buy, and why they buy. Salesforce has found that 79% of business buyers want their sales reps to be trusted advisers who add real value, due to the complex nature of B2B purchases. These customers are

looking for a guide – someone who acts more like a doctor or consultant and can help them diagnose the problem before jumping in to offer solutions.

Customers are also looking for someone to educate them, provide insights, and even challenge their way of thinking. CSO Insights' *2018 Sales Performance Study* finds that the most successful sales reps present their customers with ideas and thought leadership to advance their thinking, increasing the likelihood of becoming a strategic partner.

As a salesperson, are you helping to educate your customers on how they can solve their problem in new and innovative ways? In other words, are you taking on the role of a teacher, developing and leading your prospect

into discovering something new? And think about how your interactions with prospective customers provide value. Does your prospect gain knowledge about their problem, the upsides of fixing it, and the implications of delaying a decision?

Given this shift in expectations to both educate and deliver value to your customers, let me propose a new word – salespeople need to become "valueicators". That is, someone who approaches each interaction with the customer as an opportunity to advance that customer's thinking and provides value above and beyond what the customer expects. Ultimately, your reward for playing this role is a long-term and loyal customer.

IDEA 2: AIM TO QUANTIFY THE VALUE OF SOLVING THEIR PROBLEM

Research by IDC finds 95% of executives require financial justification before they make a purchase, yet according to Professor Malcolm Macdonald, only 5% of companies are providing this. When working with clients, I often hear that it's "too hard" to measure or track the value they are providing to customers, or that the leadership team is too paranoid to make a value-based claim.

Without a substantiated claim, however, it comes across as an empty promise rather than a credibility booster. After all, couldn't every company assert to "grow revenue" or "improve productivity"?

Getting to the heart of what to measure requires understanding exactly what your prospect (and the various decision-makers involved) is trying to accomplish. It starts at the top – what are your customers trying to achieve at a business level? How are they looking to provide more value for their end-customers? Often, we assume that our customers want the same thing we are offering – "network connectivity across the globe!" – when in reality they want to implement better technology to reduce customer complaints and improve retention.

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A great starting point to begin to understand your customer's top priorities and challenges is their annual report. This reveals the big initiatives it is focused on, and also discusses what it perceives are its top challenges and barriers to achieving success. These are both insightful pieces of information to understand how to position your solution, either as something that will enhance the customer's likelihood of meeting its top goals or as something that will help it mitigate risk.

Additionally, when talking with customers, ask questions that help you and your team understand how you will measure success. Here, it can be helpful to lead the conversation based on what your customer has stated they care about (eg. growing revenue) and what can truly be measured by both of your organisations.

Here are some questions you might ask your prospective customer to quantify what they value:

- What are your financial objectives this year?
- Which metrics are you/your department measured by?
- What are the top challenges or barriers to success you're facing?
- What would you be able to accomplish if these barriers were removed?
- What does "good" look like?
- How would we measure success? (eg. grow revenue by x%, cut costs by x%, get x more sales meetings, etc)
- What are the implications if we don't solve this problem? (eg. lose x customers, delay launching new products by x months, lose our best employees)
- How will this solution impact/improve your end-customer experience?

IDEA 3: MAKE FRIENDS WITH MARKETING

Creating valuable and relevant tools, assets and content for your customers is truly a team effort. Yet many organisations continue to struggle with sales and marketing alignment. Based on a B2B marketing and sales survey we conducted last year with Huthwaite International and Sheffield Hallam University, we found that organisations that perform above their targeted sales goals do a few things differently to deliver superior results.

First, organisations recognise that marketing and sales functions must build a relationship where role clarity, respect, and responsibility for actions are the foundation. They acknowledge that the relationship is two-way, and one will not be successful without the other. Marketing conducts industry research, shares it with sales and, in turn, sales shares what it learns from customers with marketing.

Next, the two teams share a common language. For example, agreement on what "value" is and how it will be measured across the organisation. Or a common point of contention – sales continues to

want more leads from marketing, but according to the 2018 CSO Insights study, less than 30% of companies have an agreed definition of what a "lead" is. It's difficult to deliver more leads when everyone has a different idea of what a lead is!

Lastly, we found that the most successful companies perform a win-loss analysis – a deconstruction of a sales opportunity after it has closed (regardless of whether the deal was won or lost). This can feel a bit daunting to perform after losing a deal, as nobody likes to relive their defeat, but it can be an incredible source of information for future positioning. Getting clear on why a customer chose you (or didn't), what value you promised would be delivered, and how the overall buying experience went, helps you gain insight into what's resonating with buyers and how you can continue to improve your process and offering.

Ask yourself, does your company have an established and formal process for collecting feedback from various departments: sales, marketing, product, and client services, about the customer? Each team will have a different perspective on how to articulate what the customer (and all members of the buying committee within the organisation) needs to hear at each stage of the buying process. This strengthens your value proposition and messaging and makes it that much more relevant to the customer.

BECOME A VALUABLE RESOURCE

As the CSO Insights' 2018 *Buyer Preferences* study found, only 23% of buyers consider working with vendor salespeople as a top-three resource to solve business problems. Instead, they rely on third party resources and subject matter experts (43%), previous relationships with vendors (36%), and vendor websites (35%). Further, 70% of buyers wait until after they have fully defined needs before contacting a salesperson. With sales being brought in later in the buying process, there is less opportunity to influence how the customer defines the problem they are trying to solve and exactly how they will measure success.

To turn this perception around, today's salespeople must be able to demonstrate that they can connect the dots from what the customer cares about to how their solution can help them achieve their goals.

Providing this level of value during the sales process requires listening to your customers, educating them on their problem, providing options to solve it, asking questions to help understand what they are trying to achieve, and working together to define and measure value.

In the end, customers do not buy products or services, but solutions to their problems. And it's their experience of a strong value-driven sales process that will ultimately close the deal for them.



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