

Is everyone in your organisation singing from the same song sheet?

One of the major challenges facing any person who is charged with managing a sales organisation is making sure everyone is telling the same story. Why is this important? Well, for one thing you need to convince your customers and potential customers that buying from your organisation is a sound business decision. They won't believe you if the various people they come into contact with are all telling them a different story. Furthermore, your target customers are bombarded with sales messages from all directions. If you can't deliver a consistent message then you disappear into the background noise.

What needs to be done

The audience

It's not only your customers you have to worry about. There are other stakeholders who will want to know the logic that underpins your business. Shareholders, financial investors and market analysts will all want to understand why your products and services are competitive and good value for money. If you use sales channels then you will also need to consider what your channel partners will say on your behalf. You must ensure that they too are "on message".

Where to start

With so many constituencies to communicate with, and so many people involved in the sales process, it is essential that you have a firm foundation from which to develop the essential briefing materials. And this means that you must agree what your key unique capabilities are, what benefits these bring to your customers, and how you compare with the competition. Without this common framework there will be no chance of achieving the goal of "getting everyone singing from the same song sheet" – for the simple reason that you will have no song sheet to sing from!

Building the foundation

Identifying true customer value is a task best undertaken by people who:

- a) understand the requirements of your target markets
- b) know what drives your customers
- c) know the capabilities and limitations of your offerings

It is unlikely that this breadth of knowledge will be found in any individual, so a cross-functional team is essential. But what will the team do?

The song sheet

Communicating the value

The first step is to capture your key sales messages. One of the most efficient ways to capture and communicate these is through a specially written and focused Sales Guide. Made available to all people involved in the selling process, both within your own organisation and in your channel partners, the guide encapsulates in a single document all the reasons why customers should buy your products and services.



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Singing the same song

Not only does your Sales Guide help your salespeople sell better, it also serves as a common reference point for all types of communication. Senior management can be directed to the summary sections of the guide to ensure that the key messages they take to shareholders, analysts and executives in customer organisations are in line with those being used by the salesforce. Similarly, parts of the guide can be re-purposed to form the basis for marketing materials. Other briefings, such as press releases and employee updates, can also include these important sales messages. The guide can even be used as an aid to recruiting new salespeople. The important thing is that now everyone involved is singing the same song. Customers will hear and understand your sales messages so they are more likely to take action on them.

How to develop the song sheet

Here are a few key pointers to developing a successful Sales Guide:

Don't spend too long identifying the customer value: a well-organised day or two should do it. If it takes longer than this, or you can't agree what the true customer value is, it is likely that you have not fully understood your target markets.

Don't try to do it yourself: it is just about possible to write your own Sales Guide. Some companies do, but most would accept that the job is done better by outsiders. Your own people will have neither the time, the skills, nor the impartiality required for this critical job. Much better to get expert help, so that the result is something that salespeople and others will want to use, and will turn to naturally as a source of information.

Do launch and promote the Sales Guide: once you have the Sales Guide, ensure that you launch it effectively within your own organisation, and encourage your channel partners to do likewise. Having put all that effort into creating it, make sure everyone who needs to use the guide knows of its existence and how to get access to it.

Do keep the Sales Guide up-to-date: as time moves on your customers' needs will change, new market drivers will emerge, even your partners may be different. Ensure you have a programme in place for producing and distributing updates to the "song sheet" as and when they are required.

Conclusions

One of the major advantages of the Sales Guide approach is that, if done well and produced professionally, the guide is much more than a song sheet – it is a key resource used by salespeople to plan and execute the sale, by sales support to ensure they are aligned with the salespeople they are supporting, by marketing as the prime source of marketing messages and by product management to understand the way product features translate into business benefits.

As a Sales Director you will find that it is not difficult to get people to use the guide as the common source of information. Consequently, in both your own and your channel partners' organisations you achieve the consistency of message that is so important to developing and maintaining credibility and trust. The Sales Guide, in other words, becomes your "song sheet", and getting everyone singing from it will not be as difficult as you might have imagined.

This article was written by Charles Stubbs of Solutions for Sales. For information about Solutions for Sales and further useful resources visit www.solutionsforsales.com or call +44 (0)1702 586742.

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