HAVING THE RIGHT CONVERSATION

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Ignoring the state of the economy, today's sales challenges can be seen in two dimensions. The first is the sheer level of information available to buyers, both factual and through social networking, which is 'arming them to the teeth', to quote from a previous Winning Edge article (November/December 2011). These issues can be described as a 'clear and present threat', many of which I covered in that article.

The second is, as it has always been, that people buy from people. This aspect has never been so important, even though it is clear the amount of time a rep has with buyers is reducing. As such, it has never been so important that the rep makes this time as productive as possible, but also meets the needs of the buyer, in a way that differentiates them from the competition. This makes the time reps have with buyers a real opportunity and, at the same time, a real risk.

To compound the challenge the buying process is getting longer and the number of buyers involved is growing. The 2013 Sales Performance Optimization report by CSO Insights highlights this, finding:

- 75% of deals sold to new name customers took four months or more to close
- 80% of deals involved 3 or more buyers (see graph)
- 53% of initial conversations with prospects do not progress to the next stage

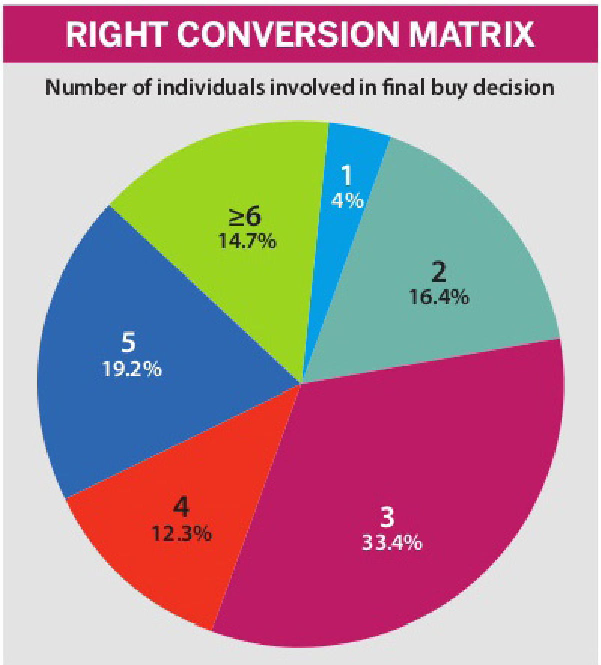
While it is problematic to try to reduce the amount of time a deal takes to close, or the number of buyers involved, it is possible to make the initial conversations as effective as they can be.

As mentioned, the amount of time a sales rep has in conversation with prospects is reducing, and the likelihood is that this trend will continue. However many complex purchases still depend on face-to-face meetings and presentations. In these opportunities, the time the rep spends with individuals on the buying team has to demonstrate a level of understanding, knowledge, empathy and technical competence that sets them apart — for all the right reasons.

During these meetings the performance of the sales rep and members of the sales team is obviously important to the outcome of the opportunity. What is also becoming clear is the high expectation of the buying team, especially in terms of their hopes and fears in selecting a vendor. While buyers are becoming more sophisticated, they are still being sold to in a way that:

- Does not recognise where they are in the buying cycle
- Is not respectful of their time
- Is not seen as sophisticated & does not add value to the process

This is emphasised by the quote here from a site for chief information officers (CIOs), who for many of us, represent one of the most important buyers. They found that, "CIOs session we chair with CIOs, they say their nirvana is to treat vendors as an equal in the development of applications that will benefit both businesses. But the sad truth that they experience is an ill-informed visitor who has not researched their organisation or its needs and then all too often bores them to death with a time-wasting PowerPoint presentation." (Source: www.cio.co.uk)



In a complex sale, we all know the problem is compounded by the growing number of people in the buying team. Each member is tasked with the same goal of sourcing a solution, but all with very different needs and wants. These needs will range considerably from strategic to business to technical to contractual.

Meeting the needs of each buyer or influencer is complex and requires an understanding of:

- Each role and their responsibilities in terms of the procurement solution
- The impact of the decision on them and their career
- Any preferences or prejudices towards vendors that they might have

So far this is fairly standard stuff — except that for a significant number of sales reps this is not standard. Researchers at Forrester, among others, have found that sales reps are not relating to buyers, let alone meeting their needs as part of the buying team. In its 2012 report, Executive buyer insight study: *Are salespeople prepared for executive conversations?* Forrester found that: "To avoid being relegated to commodity status, vendors are refining their sales strategies to engage with higher level decision-makers earlier in the problem-solving process. Getting a meeting with these executives is hard, but turning that meeting into a successful first conversation takes a lot more effort. Forrester's survey of senior-level buyers highlights the gap between what they expect and their actual experience with salespeople. To close this preparation gap, sales enablement professionals must start shifting the sales support content and training agendas from focusing on their own company and offerings to focusing more on the specific people that sales teams will encounter and the realities those customers deal with."

As part of an ongoing assignment, I have been fortunate to be working with a buyer in a major financial services organisation and a CIO from a mobile operator.
I asked them what it is that, beyond the mechanics of buying, annoys them the most about sales team behaviour. Their responses were almost word for word the same and they were animated when they described their experiences. They were very similar to those documented before in much larger studies by organisations such as CSO Insights and Rain Group. But it seemed much more impactful talking to them in person. Summarising their personal issues came down to:

- Being heard and understood
- Talking with someone who can relate and empathise with their challenges
- Engaging with individuals who earn their trust through what they do, not what they say

You would think by now that these behavioural traits in sales teams would have been adopted as standard and relegated to the most basic of sales training courses — but it would seem not. I think this presents a great opportunity to those leaders of sales teams who see the problem and are prepared to do something about it.

People will continue to buy from people, and the focus on customer experience and emotional intelligence in sales is, and will be in the future, as important as the technical and motivational components that make up a first class sales rep. However, as both buying and selling processes become more and more sophisticated through systems, unprecedented levels of information, and sheer immediacy of access to data, it is easy to overlook buyers as people with individual business needs and feelings.

The members of the buying team have:

- The same goal but different needs
- Different levels of risk reward
- Differing understanding of the business needs & technical requirements
- Personal preferences or prejudices that could get in the way

So how does the sales team relate to these challenges and ensure that they work and behave in a way that differentiates them from the competition? This is a challenge because, when it comes to the shortlist stage, a lot of what might have been seen as differentiation by the sales team will have been marginalised. Usually, as a result of pre-decision negotiation, factors such as price, technical fit, contract, features and functions will be on or near par with your competition.

The differentiation in these situations will be down to the buying team's answer to, 'Can we work with these people?' and how they feel about you. Their experience of working with you during the procurement cycle will shape this view of you, your team and your company.

Of course, within the buying team there will be preferences and clear differences. But when the shortlist is viewed as a whole, it often presents the buyers with a difficult decision, as there will not be much clear water between the vendors. But clear water can be created by ensuring that:

- The overall customer experience enhances the way the prospect assesses what it would be like to work with you
- The sales team is able to establish professional and personal credibility with the buying team
- The sales team is able to articulate the business need and the impact of your proposed solution at all levels and functions within the prospect

> *'Remember, most buyers are work-rich and time-poor. Generally, they favour giving time to sellers who add value and just understand how to communicate with them'*

It is this last item that is both obvious, but at the same time opaque. It is obvious that being able to relate to a chief executive in a way that is meaningful is a good thing. But it is not enough. Being able to relate to all the buyers in their own terms, regardless of the job role they have or the part they play in the buying team, demonstrates a deep understanding and empathy.

I would go further. This ability to relate at a personal level also shows respect to the individual you are talking to through an understanding of how difficult their role is in the procurement process. Many of these decisions can be career-limiting for buyers if the solution does not meet its stated aims.

This can be described as 'business chaining' and it is mapped to the hierarchy of the buying team and its influencers. The benefit of this approach is to ensure all meetings with all buyers have a positive outcome. You could call this the 'right conversation'. The right conversation is one that:

- Is in the Context of the business and its goals
- Is Relevant to the role of the person you are talking to
- Is Timely in terms of the challenges they face or actions they are about to take.

Remember, most buyers are work-rich and time-poor. Generally, they favour giving time to sellers who add value and just understand how to communicate with them. Everyone else gets a poor look in or no time at all. The principle of the right conversation applies to buyers and influencers alike. It works best if the selling team can have these conversations up and down the organisational structure of the buying team. They should converse using the principles of Context, Relevance and Timing

RIGHT CONVERSATION MATRIX

Strategic Goal	(Name) Infrastructure director	(Name) Service delivery head	(Name) Operations manager	(Name) Operations manager	(Name) Storage specialist
Influence level	H/L	H/L	M/L	M/L	H/H
Achieve more for less	Reduced IT operating environments, leading to simplification and reduced cost	Reducing footprint and cot increased efficiency, faster development, simple and easy to mange	Has this goal for the firm's IT, reducing footprint and cost, increased efficiency, faster development, simple and easy to manage	Reducing cost and operating complexity	Reduced footprint and faster access
Driving efficiency and effectiveness across IT	Reducing the storage capacity; more efficient and cost-effective	Providing agility - efficient deployment	Data centre project - what was achieved, especially in terms of 'net positive'	Cost of management and running (power and cooling)	Common platform for management and deployment
Improve energy savings	Supporting the 2020 'net positive' energy goal	'Net positive' achievement of goals	'Net positive' manage to improve market perception	Supporting the 2020 'net positive', especially in terms of footprint/ energy	Reduce footprint (up to 50%) leading to a reduction in power and cooling
Enable expansion into new markets	Re-use existing resources and develop new markets	Common platform to allow rapid roll out, reduced time to market	Reduced complexity and management of new installations	Improved user experience and reduced complexity	Proven pre-built architecture with rapid development
Meet compliance and governance requirements	Faster reporting and awareness of non-compliance issues	Unified architecture, single platform for all requirements, enhanced reporting	Unified architecture, single platform for all requirements, reduced complexity and total cost of ownership	Unified architecture and one operating environment	Unified architecture, single platform for all requirements reduced complexity and total cost of ownership

with whomever they are meeting, be that the CEO, business manager or staff specialist.

The best way to do this is to relate to the individual, their role, needs and responsibilities within the framework of the project or business challenge being addressed. This requires some effort and is best undertaken by the sales team as a whole.

Above is a 'Right Conversation Matrix' developed for an IT storage solution. The challenge here was to relate storage all the way up to a business and strategic level. In the first column we put the core strategic and business needs of the customer. The individuals involved in the procurement are listed across the form to create the matrix. The traffic light indicates the strength of the relationship that has been built so far.

In this example, it is clear that there is some significant ground to make up.

As you can see there were five decision-makers in the buying team from C-suite to specialist level. In order to have the right conversation with each individual, the accurate development of the matrix was important. Using a combination of research, insights and company knowledge we were able to help the sales team identify the link between the business need, the individual's role and how the solution benefited them. To reinforce the importance of this, everything in any of the boxes had to have a provenance that would stand scrutiny. This might seem overkill, but it helped to eliminate the main enemies of this process, namely:

- Assumptions, "I thought…"
- Unverifiable sources, "But we all know..."
- Preconceptions or views, "The last time I did this..."

This development of the matrix was run as a workshop with the extended sales team and other technical help. Throughout the workshop everyone in the sales team developed a deep understanding of how their solution related to each of the buyers. The benefits were:

- Confidence in discussing the business need and solution with all the buyers
- Having what could be described as a value proposition for each buyer
- Being able to rehearse different situations before meeting or phoning buyers.

By taking a workshop approach many misconceptions and misunderstandings were cleared up early, before they became issues or were aired at the customer site. The business-chaining shown in the example above meant that all conversations with prospects were in context, relevant and timely to the individual concerned.

The messages developed were also used in the proposal and in the final presentation of the solution. Again, the objective was to ensure that everyone in the decision process was engaged with and that their needs were met. Anyone new to the selling team (other specialists, project managers etc.) was talked through the opportunity and the needs of each individual using the right-conversation table. This had a deep, positive impact on the buyers and influencers involved in the process.

A significant spin-off advantage was the consistency of the message being relayed to the buying team. This increased the clarity of the benefits of the solution.

The application of the right conversation is powerful. It relates to buyers as individuals and is respectful of their time, position and workload. In this way, sales teams can create clear water between themselves and their competitors, which will influence the final decision.

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