



Think Like Your Customer: Aligning Selling to Buying Process

By Gary M. Katz

I'm finishing up Bill Stinnett's excellent book, *Think Like Your Customer*, which should be required reading for anyone in Sales and Marketing, especially if you market high-value products and services.

A glaring Marketing Operations disconnect for many companies is our tendency to over-focus on What and How we want to sell, when we really need to develop a deeper understanding of What, Why and How our customers buy. Those of us in MO need to assert leadership in aligning our company's sales process with our customers' buying process.

The healing starts at home. Our collective lack of effectiveness in supporting one of our primary customers, Sales, surely speaks to the growing emphasis today on Sales and Marketing alignment.

Yes, Sales and Marketing have equal roles in this often-dysfunctional relationship. Yet it is incumbent on us as marketers to take responsibility for cleaning up our side of the house if we want a shot at a healthy, mutual partnership with Sales. If you've been in a long-term business relationship or a marriage, you know what I mean. Our unilateral thinking and actions impact the overall health of the system, for better or for worse.

So how does all of this relate to Stinnett's book? I've gleaned a couple of key insights below that are especially meaningful to me. I also discuss some possible implications of these insights, which I recommend my fellow marketers and MO practitioners seriously ponder:

1. ***We need to remember our customers are buying a desired outcome, not a solution.*** Our organizational focus should be on understanding the gap between our customers'/prospects' current state and their desired future state — the motive, the urgency, the payback, the consequences of inaction, the means to act, and the perceived risks in acting.

Implications for marketers: *We can best support Sales by providing the process and means to better understand this gap. We also need to deliver collateral and marketing programs that attract prospects interested in bridging the gap. We need to continually ask ourselves some key questions to ensure that our selling process is not just aligned with the customer, but with our business goals. How well can we fill the gap for the customer and still meet our profit objectives? How can we support Sales to ensure that new sales reps are properly trained to act in accord with this customer-centric approach?*

2. ***We need to understand our customers' buying process and imperative to buy.*** Where are they in the buying process? What do they need to do next? Who else is part of the decision process? How can we enable our customer champions to take the next step in the buying process? We need to understand the motive behind the potential selling opportunity motive to support sales reps. Is the reason to buy a planned replacement, an unplanned replacement, a new purchase to keep up with the competition or a new purchase to get ahead? Is the initiative supported from the top-down or is it bottom-up? How does this initiative rank in terms of priority compared to other initiatives the customer might choose to fund? *If we don't understand these fundamental buying factors, we won't be able to support Sales with strategic intent. We'll just be providing air cover, absent a battle.*



Implications for marketers: *The programs we establish, the campaigns we develop, and the tools we create need to be geared toward helping Sales help our customers to buy. Does Sales believe our marketing programs, campaigns and sales tools contribute to gaining greater access to qualified prospects? Reaching “hidden” decision makers? Equipping customer champions to sell on our behalf? Is there significant tension for the customer to buy? Our credibility with Sales is at stake. Our sales reps need to trust that the leads we provide are legitimate qualified opportunities. They’ll have much greater respect for us and the quality of our leads if we take the responsibility to nurture prospects until they are truly ready to buy. This means, when the customer has demonstrated that they know what they are buying, why they are buying and how they are going to buy it. The last thing we want to do is waste our sales resources on a sourcing decision (“Who will I buy from?”) when we (and/or our prospect) don’t have a strong handle on the why, what and how.*

It really comes down to aligning our internal sales and marketing process (with our internal customer, Sales) with our customer buying process. This is a fruitful area for Marketing Operations to focus. Our contributions can make a real difference in our organization’s ability to:

- Attract and win the right prospects and customers
- Nimble and appropriately respond to sales opportunities, based on a sound understanding of where prospects are in their buying cycles
- Optimize our sales resources to focus on high-touch, ready-to-buy opportunities
- Empower our customer champions to be highly effective advocates of our value proposition
- Mobilize our marketing resources – programs, campaigns, collateral – where they will have the greatest impact

Call to Action

If your company is facing challenges in any of the areas discussed in this article, or if you are thinking about creating a marketing operations function or increasing the effectiveness of the one you already have, you should start with a "current state assessment" that will help you evaluate the overall health of your marketing and/or Marketing Operations today. Doing so will help you zero in on those areas that represent your most difficult challenges as well as your greatest opportunities for bringing the significant benefits of MO best practices to your organization.

About the Author:



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