

Hunting with Arrows

One of the hardest and most trying parts of selling is capturing the attention of our prospects. I received a cold call this week from a young lady selling IT consulting services. I felt bad for her, the call was a disaster. She could not articulate any specific problems they could tackle, the types of customers they target or examples of how they had helped businesses similar to mine. Her employer had given her a list of companies to call and a value proposition of "we help companies solve their IT issues." Basically she was hunting with a blindfold and a butter knife.

Companies consistently fail their sales people, because they do not equip them with clear value propositions to hunt with. No one wants to prospect with a ubiquitous set of services. When sales people lack clarity in their offering one of two symptoms can emerge. First, sales people focus on existing customer relationships. It is much easier to go deep and wide in an account once there is rapport and understanding developed between the sales person and the buyer. The second symptom, which can be even more dangerous, is each sales person interprets the corporate offering and develops their own value proposition. Now your brand gets fractured every time a sales person engages a customer.

Why should I buy?

Most companies have a great product or service, but why should I buy? No customer wants to spend money, but they will make investments to solve problems. Developing your unique selling proposition (USP) should start by answering the key problems you solve in very clear terms. Buyers don't think in broad sweeping concepts, but in targeted issues that they can solve and push past. In the book *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, Al and Laura Ries relate the story of how ACT software defined itself as a "contact manager." When the Rieses first engaged Patrick Sullivan, then CEO of ACT, they asked him what does your software do? He responded, "Everything ... ACT keeps track of your calendar, your correspondence, your mailing list, and your expense accounts. ACT literally does everything."

Could you imagine trying to sell ACT then, a software package that does everything? I can just imagine the intro script, "Hi, I am calling to introduce ACT. We have a software package that keeps track of your calendar, your correspondence, your mailing list, and your expense accounts. Could I come by your office next week to show you how this software does everything?" How would you have responded to the sales rep on the other end of the phone?

ACT acquired its impressive market share and brand recognition once it brought clarity to its sales message. They defined ACT as a "contact and customer management for individuals and organizations involved in selling and other functions where management of contact details, activities and communications is critical." We can easily categorize it, define the problems it solves and when we should buy it. ACT is a *contact manager*. It seems pretty simple on the surface, but I am sure ACT struggled for a long time to find that level of clarity.

Triggers to move people to action

Finding your unique selling proposition is not about what you have to sell, but the problems you solve for your customers. The classic definition of a USP is a statement that clearly articulates what sets you apart and makes you different in the marketplace. The problem is it is focused on you, not the customer. When a USP is focused on your product or service you will see sales reps using lines like "total cost of ownership," "return on investment," and "improve efficiency." These might be great overall deliverables, but they are not enough to trigger a person to buy. To bring a prospect to action you need to identify specific problems that carry an emotional connection for the buyer, a trigger event. A trigger event is a problem or event a person is willing to take action to solve.

Why would a company switch from ACT to Salesforce.com? They might not be 100% satisfied with ACT, but it works. Yet if the company opened two new offices, the trigger event, ACT may no longer meet their needs. Now the company needs a web based tool that will easily integrate customer data across multiple offices. All the ROI messages would have gone on deaf ears prior to the trigger event, but the need for a web enabled contact manager is motivating the company to switch.

A complex solution like Salesforce.com may target a broad range of triggers that mean different things to different customers. This is where corporate focus is so important. Salesforce.com positions itself as an "on demand customer relationship management" solution. The clarity in their position provides the sales team with areas to focus on. They can develop selling messages for on demand sales force automation, on demand customer service, on demand marketing and with their AppExchange a broad range of on demand CRM bolt-ons. Each solution carries a different set of triggers that the sales team can use to target a specific customer segment.

Finding your unique selling proposition

Does your product or service commonly get engaged to solve specific problems? These are your trigger events. To define your unique selling proposition start by understanding your trigger events from the buyer's perspective:

1. What problem is the buyer trying to solve?
2. What options are available to them to solve it?
3. How will they shop for a solution?
4. What does the problem mean to the buyer emotionally?
5. How will your product or service solve this problem?

The purpose of the exercise is to define how a buyer categorizes your solution and the types of results they are looking for. When a sales person engages a prospect they should be able to quickly define their category and the key problems they solve. This allows them to set the stage for questions that will engage the prospect and help identify where they are in the buying process. If a sales person gets in when the prospect is in a shopping stage then they can get to work selling. Otherwise they will need to work with the prospect over a longer period of time to build a business case and develop the issue into a problem that is immediate and actionable.



Prospecting is fun for the sales team once they are armed with the messages that speak to a readily identifiable set of customer challenges. Sure they will still face a lot of rejection, but at least they know what they are hunting for. More importantly your sales people will have the tools and answers to help companies solve their problems. By giving your sales team the trigger events and value propositions to engage a prospect enables them to do their job: acquire and build great customer relationships.

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