

These days more and more selling takes place in call centres, but are you staff really equipped with the necessary sales skills to make this pay dividends? **Warren Pearce** takes a look at how to sell through building relationships

Making your marriage work the seven stages of selling



Day one of any sales course and, like as not, you will meet AIDA. This most well-established of salesforce acronyms stands for Attention, Interest, Desire and Action, the four classic elements designed to turn a prospect into a customer. And, used properly, these are fine as the basis of a successful acquisition or 'courtship' strategy.

But you cannot stop there. After the 'thrill of the chase' comes the marriage itself, followed by children and other events which will inevitably put strains on the relationship. Put simply, to make the marriage work, you must keep working at it.

So it is with a commercial relationship. It has become an almost universal commercial mantra today that, whether buying or selling, companies are looking to establish long-term partnerships. In order to turn otherwise empty words into meaningful action, for vendors this means that selling does not stop once the contract is signed and the product delivered and paid for.

The first four steps of customer acquisition must similarly be followed by three which form the essential elements of a successful retention strategy – making your customer (your 'partner') feel welcome and valued, taking advantage of opportunities to increase business and regularly add value.

Having said all this, good quality personal selling and business development skills can only go so far. To ensure all support mailings and other activities are properly targeted and well-timed – anticipating the needs of customers and prospects – this needs to be supported by high quality technology, in the shape of an effective contact management programme.

Acquisition

So, what typically form the strongest elements of a successful acquisition strategy today?

■ **Attention** – over time, companies have tried many methods of attracting attention including, most recently, spamming. Because of the sheer volume currently hitting the buyer's desk, such mechanisms quickly invoke the law of diminishing returns. More importantly, the new Privacy and Communications (EC Directive) Regulations, effective 11 December 2003, will see the demise of the 'happy spammer'.

By contrast, two traditional methods which have somewhat gone out of fashion rather than outlived their usefulness are the letter of introduction and the fax-shot communication. The concise, single-page letter of introduction for example retains its impact – enhanced indeed by its relative rarity today – by controlling the tone and pace at the outset, outlining in a straightforward and professional manner who you are and what you can do for the recipient. Indeed, fax-shots are currently receiving a strong response, again due to the surprise of receiving a 'fax'.

Strong feedback from our partners, albeit anecdotal, all points to the fact that both these strongly personalised contact vehicles are currently achieving higher response levels than two years ago;

■ **Interest** – in utilising such strong sales tools as case studies, white papers and tele-marketing communications at this stage, the key driver of success here is relevance. The key is to build on the initial contact by demonstrating a pragmatic knowledge of the customer's sector that will add real value to the sales proposition. Any contact

should be direct and to the point, recognising that the customer's time is itself both valuable and limited;

■ **Desire** – seminars, workshops and product demonstrations are popular ways to carry the client through what is usually a one-hit opportunity to carry the prospect through this critical stage. Using IT to sell IT, at FrontRange we have also found that the web-inar or web-demo is proving increasingly successful, as it combines the strength of the personal one-to-one approach with an open structure which allows concerns to be aired and addressed in advance of the sales pitch;

■ **Action** – as long as the sales person is well-prepared, well-trained and takes a truly consultative approach in unearthing real – as opposed to expressed – need, they should now be fully capable of converting the sale. The essential elements are, wherever possible to get in front of the buyer and make a strong, positive sales pitch – there is no place at this advanced stage for the soft sell based on a fear of rejection.

Once the sale has been made – and the commercial marriage consummated – there are three critical steps to ensure the relationship is maintained and provide no reason for the customer to consider divorce:

■ **Getting married** – the first step in any successful retention strategy is to thank the buyer for their order, using their favoured medium of communication. It is still important to show you are worthy of their custom and that your objective is to build a relationship – continuing to add value via a welcome pack, newsletter or loyalty programme for example;



- ▶ ■ Having kids – any business will have a lot of information on its customers and it is essential to understand where it is going within its marketplace. It is important to maintain close links with the customer and, by analysing such data, generate cross-sell and up-sell opportunities via tailored messaging and highly targeted communications. As a result, the customer will remain hooked and not defect;
- Keep working at it – working in conjunction with partners it is vital continually to add value for the customer, via newsletters, market updates, technical reviews and other service offerings, in order to reduce attrition over time.

Evidence that this works is not hard to find. A FrontRange partner monitoring the implementation of such a rigorous acquisition and retention approach in this way and has recently recorded a 50 per cent in revenue from its customer base.

At the same time, with the emphasis on proactive use of customer data throughout all stages of the acquisition and retention process, it is essential to take advantage of proven technologies to maximise the return from such activity.

Contact management and sales automation tools like FrontRange's GoldMine Business Manager Corporate Edition for example provide the all-round view of the customer necessary for effective lead management in the 'wooing' phase. Similarly, once the prospect has been converted, the HEAT Service and Support suite of products is an ideal example of the kind of high-quality helpdesk tools available to keep increasingly demanding customers happy.

Today there is a huge amount of data available on prospects customers and their markets which can no longer be effectively managed manually. From the very first contact, it is important to capture each detail and track contact information in order to be able to analyse and understand your customers' buying habits.

The purpose is to get best value from the business development spend, by prioritising lead development – identifying your best revenue opportunities and concentrating on those prospects with high profit potential and most likely to convert. Equally important, leads analysis provides valuable insights into which marketing campaigns are working, so helping better targeting. And the whole process can be managed simply and effectively by having all this information in



one, easily accessible place.

What this means in practical terms is that a portfolio can be developed on each key decision-maker and influencer within the buying unit of each key prospect, thus providing a complete picture of their needs and concerns which can be addressed in advance of the proposal.

And this personalised approach does not stop once the contract is signed. By increasing the number of queries resolved at first contact for example, automated customer service and support solutions not only help reduce costs but, critically, improves customer service and retention levels. In addition to speed of response, customers also benefit from dealing with the supplier via their chosen media, including the ability to service their own needs, when appropriate, via self-help tools.

In summary therefore, neither selling skills nor technology on their own can form the basis of a mutually beneficial long-term business partnership. It is only by successfully integrating these two critical elements that any such commercial 'marriage can work'. From initial contact to repeat business.

AUTHOR

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