

# Bridging the Gap between Marketing and Sales

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**Abstract:** At most companies, there is insufficient communication between the marketing and sales functions. Such organizations need to find the key to bridging this gap, for the rewards of restoring productive communication between the 2 can be substantial. For the marketing manager, forming a strong alliance with the salesforce can result in increased access to prime marketing intelligence data, for salespeople are in constant contact with prospects and customers. Another major advantage for the marketing manager will be the ability to empower marketing tools. There are a number of ways to solicit valuable input from salespeople. Marketers at some large corporations rely on electronic mail systems as an integral part of the communication process between marketing and sales. In a small company, the best strategy may be to hold regular meetings where proposed marketing issues and collateral materials are discussed in an open forum. Forming strong bonds with the salesforce can provide the marketing manager with information that results in powerful, well-targeted marketing materials.

**Keywords:** Marketing, Alliances, Communication, Sales, Strategic planning.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The classic relationship between marketing and sales often entails confusion and poor communication. Disgruntled salespeople grumble about marketing they see as ineffective, while the marketing staff claims mediocre sales are the fault of poor execution on the part of the sales force. Either way, the result is pretty much the same--sales are down, or everyone's looking for someone else to blame.

This is clearly counterproductive. Nonetheless, it's happening every day at companies all over the world--and if this isn't the case where you work, then you're the exception rather than the rule. For the rest of us, we need to find the key to bridging this gap and reinvigorating sales, and that means restoring productive communication between marketing and sales.

For the marketing manager, forming a strong alliance with the sales force is an essential strategic move, one that will allow you to empower your marketing materials and develop collateral that's well targeted with the power of an enthusiastic sales force behind it.

Why undertake this challenge? Aside from the obvious benefits, better flow of information, mutual trust, establishing common goals, another major plus is the increased access you'll have to prime marketing intelligence data. Let's face it : Salespersons are always in constant contact with their prospects and customers. They're fantastic at informational channel, and by working closely with salespeople and listening to what they have to say, you'll get the insider's view of what your prospects are really looking for.

## 2. THE COMFORTS OF KEEPING CLOSE

Tapping into the mind of your customers and prospects through interaction with the sales force will help you avoid marketing in a vacuum. As a marketer, it can be tempting to develop and implement a positioning strategy based on what appears to be the "hot" issues in the industry. But in doing so, are you really pitching the issues of greatest importance to your target market?

A case in point: I'm part of an industry--computer software--in which technological changes occur at a tremendous rate. These days, however, it seems that the rate of change often outpaces customers' demand for the technology. A good example of this is "client/server" technology, a concept that's been getting a good deal of editorial coverage in the hi-tech industry media these days. Basically, a client/server strategy helps companies move data-processing responsibilities from

mainframe computers to PCs and LANs (local area networks), and also facilitates the sharing of data between these computer systems.

Reacting to all the attention the press has given to this concept, a number of software and hardware companies have begun to revise their product positioning in order to address the increasing interest in client/server technology.

This appeared like a sufficiently sensible technique, yet before rolling out any improvements ourselves, I asked my business reps what their prospects and clients were saying in regards to the customer/server idea. The vox populi made it clear that most companies simply weren't ready to adopt client/server technology. As a result, we opted not to make significant changes in our marketing strategy. Since then, independent research has confirmed the message we'd received from our salespeople. Thus, by working closely with the sales force, I gained access to information that was critical to our making a major marketing decision.

A second major advantage to forming a strong alliance with your salespeople will be your ability to empower your marketing tools. As a marketer, one of your primary responsibilities is to provide salespeople with the tools they need to sell more effectively, and since salespeople can get quite choosy when it comes to which tools to use and how to use them, this becomes an extremely important issue because of its impact on the bottom line.

Albeit no great advertiser will be without a large group of innovative thoughts that will yield shining white papers, splendid handouts, and provocative comparative investigations, it's further bolstering your good fortune to check with your business people before accusing in front of generation. Keep in mind: If they don't care for a specific promoting apparatus, odds are they won't utilize it, and this advantages nobody. All things considered, you're not concocting new guarantee materials for your wellbeing.

I found this out the hard way when our sales force refused to use a customer profile I'd written and duplicated en masse. They objected to a customer quotation that had been used a minor issue, perhaps, but one that made them uncomfortable. I still have boxes of that piece in inventory. Obviously, keeping in touch with your salespeople will help you produce the kind of materials they're looking for, and the resulting tools should perform well in the hands of an animated, enthused sales force.

Having learned this valuable lesson early on, I frequently seek the advice of our sales reps on assorted marketing projects during their developmental phase. This technique was extremely helpful in our recent production of a new brochure for MOZART, our company's base product. Discussions with our sales manager helped clarify what the salespeople felt were the tool's most salient selling points, points they thought should be emphasized in new collateral materials. As a marketer, I came at these things from a somewhat different angle; talking with sales gave me an important perspective on the product from the people who are selling it every day.

The end result of this cooperative effort between marketing, sales, and our energetic design firm was an extremely effective piece, one that positioned the product well and presented the major benefits of the MOZART development tool via a lively, graphically appealing medium and most important, one that would be used by the sales force.

### **3. BUILDING STRONGER TIES**

The rewards of developing closer ties between marketing and sales are obvious to all involved. The issue is, it's hard to transform this respectable logic into beginning practice. In requesting info from your sales representatives, then, it's critical that you first offer them on the chance to have some information and effect on your company's promoting materials. You'll need to utilize all you're advertising gifts to offer the worth and potential aftereffects of creating solid correspondence in the middle of showcasing and deals. But fear not: nobody appreciates a quality sales pitch like a salesperson, and if you sell the concept well, your sales force will be excited to have a chance to directly influence the creation of the tools they'll use on a regular basis.

Still, the odds are that your sales people will at first be skeptical about the idea. If the relationship between marketing and sales within your organization has been at all strained, you're going to have to make a significant effort to gain your salespeople's trust. More than anything else, it's essential to make them feel their input is well valued.

The direct approach is best. In forging better ties between these two important entities, you'll be asking salespeople to devote a lot of their time and resources to the effort. Just be sure to make it clear that the results will be worth the trouble. Reinforcement is the key issue here. If sales staffers see that you've heeded their word, they'll most likely continue to

provide you with the advice and information you need. At the same time, if better information helps you produce the kind of marketing tools that close more business, no doubt your sales people will be happy to cooperate when they're asked for their input.

Be careful, however, that when you gather information from those in the trenches you ask the right questions. Well-focused, structured questions are the key to any good market research effort, and this is just as true when it comes to working with your sales force. For example, if you're collecting data on a competitive product and you want your sales force to help, give them a list of specific questions you need answered: What features of the product are of interest to the prospect? What functions does this product have that yours may not? How is the product priced? What sort of customer service does the vendor provide? Targeted questions such as these will give direction to your investigation, make your resulting data more accurate and reliable, and facilitate the information-gathering process for your salespeople.

#### **4. KEEPING COMPETITIVE**

We sell our MOZART developmental tool in a fiercely competitive environment. New products enter this market on a regular basis, and products that are currently available are constantly being upgraded and improved. It's my job to track exactly who's doing what, and keeping close tabs on similar products not only allows me to position our products more effectively but also helps me position the competition. Thus, it's essential that I know competitive products as well as I know my own.

In order to follow these competitive offerings in detail, I rely heavily on input from the sales force. While I may be able to gather data on my own through various means, some of the best information I receive about both new and upgraded products comes directly from our salespeople. After all, they're the ones on the front line. They're involved in new sales situations every day, and in an industry that changes so often, they frequently encounter new products and strategies.

The close communication we've developed between marketing and sales is invaluable for both areas. By passing information about contenders on to the showcasing office, our salesmen know that this sort of execution is important to gather data about focused items that will permit them to contend all the more productively and adequately.

There are any number of ways to solicit this valuable input from your sales people. In large corporations, I've seen marketers who rely on electronic mail systems as an integral part of the communication process between marketing and sales. In a small company such as ours, the best strategy has been to hold regular meetings where proposed marketing issues and collateral materials are discussed in an open forum.

Consider the development of a competitive white paper, for example. The project might be sparked by a suggestion from a sales manager who has noticed that his salespeople are encountering a particular product on an increasingly regular basis in competitive situations. As marketing manager, I would come to our next meeting prepared with a list of questions about this new product that would then be disseminated among the salespeople for follow-up. The investigation into the product would be complemented by research on the competitive company itself - annual revenues, number of employees, target markets, strategic direction, and all other pertinent issues.

I would then take this information and the data gathered by our sales force and write a draft. This draft would then go through a structured evaluation process, where comments would be collected and discussed in meetings and the paper revised accordingly. The result is a piece that the sales force is thoroughly comfortable with. They're confident the collateral materials cover the issues we've mutually determined to be key selling points, and as a result, they're able to use this marketing tool with greater effectiveness.

This synergistic relationship between marketing and sales can produce stellar results; our own sales revenue is projected to grow 160% over the course of this fiscal year alone. As a marketer, I can testify to the fact that forming strong bonds with your sales force will provide you with information that results in powerful, well-targeted marketing materials. Just remember that above all else, increased input from those on the front lines will ensure that your positioning is and remains right on target.

The approach itself is really quite simple: Devise a way to solicit input from your salespeople that's appropriate for the size and structure of your company, then use focused questions to get the data you need through your new information channel. When your revenue figures start to increase and your salespeople stop grumbling and start grinning, you'll know firsthand the satisfaction and peace of mind that bridging the impasse between marketing and sales can bring to you and your company.

## **5. WORKING WITH SALES: A MARKETING MANAGER'S FIVE RULES FOR SUCCESS**

To develop a strong alliance between marketing and sales, it's important to keep the following points in mind:

### **1. KNOW YOUR TARGET MARKET :**

As a marketer, you're well aware of the need to pay close attention to the needs and goals of prospects in your target market. In working with your salespeople, you'll be "selling" your concepts to them. To pitch your marketing ideas most effectively, carefully consider the professional and personal needs of your salespeople. The better you understand their character, the easier it will be for you present your marketing concepts in a convincing manner.

### **2. BE PREPARED TO LISTEN :**

Simple advice perhaps, but listening closely to the input of your salespeople is the key to making the marketing/sales alliance work. People love to hear themselves talk; reign in your own desire to hold the floor and instead concentrate on listening to the ideas of others.

### **3. BE DIPLOMATIC :**

Professional diplomacy is essential in working with your salespeople. In soliciting input from them, you'll no doubt be presented with some ideas that are extraordinary, others that are of moderate worth, and a select few that are downright ridiculous. It's important that you be consistent and positive when dealing with each suggestion. Remember: You may not decide to implement a recommendation, but it's important that you treat the idea--and the person offering it--with respect.

### **4. BE FLEXIBLE :**

Keeping an open mind is crucial to the success of your marketing/sales partnership. Someone may suggest a way of dealing with a certain marketing issue that's radically different from what has been done in the past. Don't fear innovation! Take advantage of such creative thought to revamp your marketing where needed.

### **5. CULTIVATE TRUST :**

For this kind of alliance to be productive, the respective members need to trust one another. Your diplomatic demeanor, open-mindedness, and flexibility will all contribute to the development of positive personal and professional relationships with your salespeople. Let them know you have their best interests at heart and that they can rely on you to heed their advice and provide the kind of marketing support that will make their sales efforts a success.

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