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Have your sales and marketing changed to reflect today’s sales trends and buying behaviors?

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From advances in digital technology to the lasting impacts of the Covid pandemic, nearly every aspect of the business world has been upended in the last few years. Yet far too many B2B sales and marketing efforts ignore the dramatic changes in customer buying behaviors.

Although the dynamics between B2B buyers and sellers have profoundly changed, few company leaders have shifted their sales approach. Buyers once took the time to sit down with salespeople because it was an opportunity to learn more about the marketplace. Salespeople controlled the flow of information. The supremacy of the sales role is why so many companies treated marketing as a stepchild or necessary evil instead of an effective tool.

Today’s buyer is an entirely different animal. Thanks to the internet, the information companies need to make purchase decisions is widely available — everything from product and service details to objective reviews from other customers. A generation ago, a salesperson could insist their product set the industry’s standards for quality; today, one- and two-star reviews suggest that’s wishful thinking.

How buyers and sellers interact has changed, too. I remember when a sizable portion of sales calls focused on the social side. Before moving into the planned pitch, salespeople spent a significant amount of time playing the “getting to know you” game, gathering basic information about the buyer to refine their pitches. Sometimes, getting from introduction to proposal required several conversations.

Walk into a prospect’s office today asking, “What exactly does your company do?” or “Where are your facilities located?” or even “Where did you go to school?” and you won’t be seen as friendly or inquisitive. Instead, you’ll be viewed as ignorant and disrespectful of the buyer’s time. After all, that information is readily available, so if you don’t already know it, the prospect will assume you were too lazy to do your homework.

Put another way, buyers are now in charge. The ready availability of information has empowered them to make better choices based on factual details instead of who schmoozed best on the golf course.

That’s just part of the current sales landscape. Gartner’s recent Future of Sales study of B2B buyers revealed something that should terrify sales leaders who insist on sticking to the tried-and-true. It revealed that customer employees who are involved in buying complex business solutions — in other words, what most companies sell — spent just 17 percent of the total buying process interacting with salespeople. More striking, that 17 percent gets divided among all the potential sellers being considered for a purchase, so if your company is one of five being considered, you’re getting less than 4 percent of their attention.

If your prospects aren’t spending time talking to your friendly sales team, are they just goofing off? Hardly. According to Gartner, they spend 45 percent of their time — nearly half — doing their own research on the internet and through other sources, and another 33 percent building consensus among stakeholders.

Without studying the detailed results, I’d confidently wager those millennials, who notoriously prefer to do their own research rather than calling or emailing to ask others for information, devote even less than 17 percent to interacting with salespeople. By 2025, says Gartner, 80 percent of B2B interactions between buyer and seller will happen in digital channels.

What does this mean for sales leaders? First, it’s time to accept that the sales process has changed forever. If your prospects are already drawing conclusions about who can best meet their needs by visiting websites and other digital channels, your content better be perfect. Not only must it include all the information the prospect needs to reach a decision — even if that’s only whether you’ll land on the short list — it also must leave them with a clear image of who your company is and what makes you the best choice. The same is true of all your other marketing channels.

You can’t afford to treat your website and other marketing efforts as afterthoughts. They have increasingly become the primary lens through which your prospects (and no doubt your current customers) see your company. If those channels fail to provide an accurate message, attractive image, and critical content, you’re not going to land the business. Nor can you rely on your sales team to cross-sell customers on all the other things they should be buying from you, because they won’t have the time or even the opportunity to do so. That information better be communicated across your marketing channels, too.

If you want to stay in business and continue to grow, it’s time to truly become client driven. Where to start? One way is to have a strategic partner like Buckaroo who can provide an objective, outside-in viewpoint to analyze and assess where you stand in relation to your competition. Accept that your job is to meet the buyer where they are with what they want to know. Neither of you can afford to waste time on schmoozing.

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