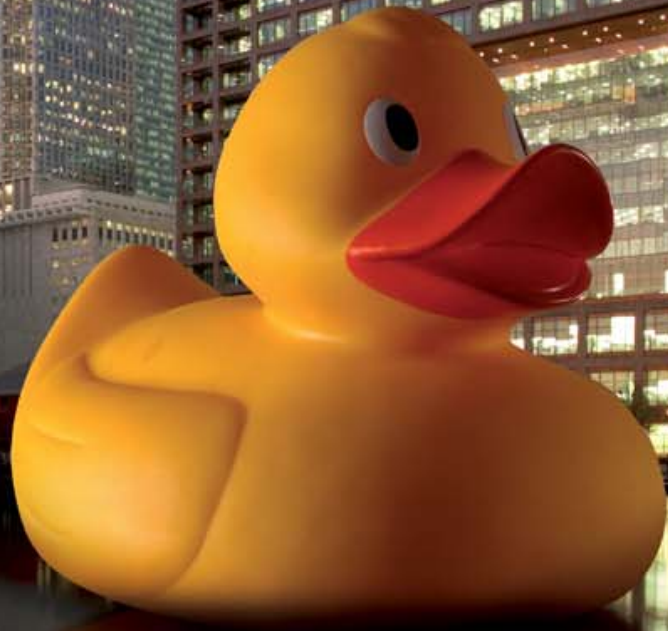


If your customers aren't seeing sales people, who are they seeing? – Maximising selling opportunities in tough times



 **Huthwaite**
Improving sales performance *International*

Change behaviour. Change results.

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In normal times responsibility for sales obviously lies with the sales-force. Hardly surprising given these are the people with both the opportunity and the capability to sell. But what happens when times get tough? What happens when, because of economic uncertainty, or lack of liquidity, or a simple crisis of confidence, customers simply stop seeing sales people at all?

This is the dilemma many companies now face. At a time when protecting, and if possible growing, sales revenues is more important than ever, more and more customers are refusing to meet with sellers because, for one reason or another, they are simply not ready or willing to buy. In an instant, one of the prerequisites of sales success, the opportunity to sell, is removed. Even worse, without the opportunity to sell, your 'products' become irrelevant. It doesn't matter what new innovations, or extra features, or aggressive pricing you adopt, if the customers won't meet your sellers they can't sell! So, if your sellers don't have the opportunity to sell, who does?

The answer is your 'service' personnel. Whatever your industry or market sector, the chances are

there are people from your organisation who have regular and frequent customer contact, even in hard times. These people have many roles and job titles, from the obvious, service engineers or customer service agents, to the less so, audit clerks, nurse practitioners or consultants. Almost every selling organisation has some group of customer facing people who are not in a sales role, and, in most cases, you will have more of these 'service' people than sellers.

AND, the really good news is, not only are your customers willing to see these people, they actively invite your service personnel to visit them. When times are tough and capital spend is down, maintaining existing assets and getting more from existing systems and processes becomes crucial. Your service operation becomes busier than ever.

Finally, bear in mind that every customer, whatever his or her role, influences their company's buying decisions. They don't have to be senior managers or procurement professionals to have a say. Indeed, when times are hard and every penny spent is scrutinised, it's your day-to-day contacts, with their intimate knowledge of the quality of your products or services, who are the real judges of your quality and the real decision makers when it comes to buying.

So the answer is simple; if you have

lots of service people, and they have lots of customer contact (otherwise known as opportunities to sell), and it's nothing to do with your 'products', then all you have to do is get your service people to sell! If only it was that easy.

Opportunity is only one of the things needed for sales success and, whilst service may have opportunities in abundance, they may lack the other necessary attributes. So what are these other things your service people need for sales success?

Recognition

Many service people, quite rightly see their role as simply that – service. They deliver the services wanted by the customer, be it repairing equipment, giving legal advice or providing patient care, to a pre-agreed level. Selling is left to the salesforce and never the twain shall meet.

Step one is getting service to accept they have a role in sales, to create an understanding of the role within sales that service plays.

Willingness

Unfortunately, recognising the need for a role and committing to fulfilling that role are not the same thing. Many service people may recognise a need to 'sell' at an intellectual level but, when it comes to putting it into practice, simply can't bring themselves to do it.

Step two is creating a willingness within the service population to become more sales orientated.

Capability

Knowing what to do is a start, being willing to do it helps, but unless you know HOW to do it you'll still not succeed. It's unreasonable to expect service people to have any, let alone well-developed, sales skills, so equipping service with the skills they need to actually be more sales focussed is essential.

Step three is equipping the service population with the skills and tactics they need to have a positive sales impact.

So, you get your service people ready and willing first, and **then** you train them to be sellers? Again, if only it was that simple.

If it was that easy you would have done it already, so let's think about what's really involved. In most organisations sales people are, rightly or wrongly, perceived as higher in the corporate hierarchy than their service colleagues. So, anyone in service with an attitude and aptitude for sales is probably looking to transfer anyway. The reason many service people work in service is precisely because they enjoy customer contact but they don't want to sell. They have often made a conscious decision not to move into a sales role and are completely happy with that choice.

When you think about it in that way the chances of turning your service people into sellers is virtually nil.

So are we back to square one? Fortunately no. Like so many things in life service/sales is not a binary state, you don't have to be one or the other, there are shades of grey – what Huthwaite International call the service/sales continuum. As service operations progress along the continuum they generate more value for both customer and seller; service becomes more 'salesy'. The key is that each organisation, and if necessary each individual, can progress along the continuum as far as their capabilities and willingness allows. Service does move nearer to sales, but only as far as each person is comfortable –and hence willing to do.

The service/sales continuum

Whilst this is a true continuum, with a gradual change from one position to another, we can consider it as a number of 'phases':

Service – the customer gets what the customer has asked for. They get the value they expect and the seller gets the agreed return. Any additional value for the seller (let's call it sales value), for example the goodwill generated by a job well done, is intangible.

Outstanding service – giving the customer something above and

beyond their expectations or 'going the extra mile'. The customer gets more value and the sales value, whilst still intangible may be higher, for example the customer tells an associate of his good experience. For some this may be enough - give outstanding service and hope you get more sales as a result. We feel that's still a bit too passive, we think you can go further.

Sales awareness. At this stage the service person begins to look beyond the immediate service issue and actively seeks to find potential, tangible sales value, things that can be fed back to the sales department to add to their sales intelligence and perhaps to generate a sales lead. The customer gets, at least, the same value as before and, by spotting potential problems or new benefits before they've been recognised by the customer, there's a potential to create new, real customer value too.

Sales though service. Here the service person begins to move to a more explicit sales role, not only looking for and identifying additional customer needs but also offering solutions to them. The key is the additional solution is sold, not simply given free to the customer. The sales value is tangible and real, an extra sale, and, by fulfilling a previously unrecognised customer need, real additional customer value is also created.

Sales. Finally there is the full-blown role of selling; identifying customer needs, developing and creating real customer value and, in return, creating sales revenue for your own organisation. This is the realm of the sales-force but, by moving your service people along the service/sales continuum, it is no longer a dark art in the eyes of service. It also stops being an 'us and them' situation with sales and service at best remote from each other, and worst, openly hostile towards each other. It becomes, for you, a collaborative and joined up effort to create real customer and sales value and, for your customers, it becomes a genuinely seamless experience across every customer touch point.

By equipping your service people with the willingness, recognition and capability to move up the service/sales continuum you can maximise the opportunities presented by the economic downturn to build a seamless organisation, creating real customer and sales value at every customer touch point, every time.



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