

SOAPBOX

The service/sales continuum - bridging the great divide?

For businesses to survive and prosper when times are hard it must lie with service personnel to create and deliver the necessary value, says David Freedman, sales director, Huthwaite International

Many service people, quite reasonably, see their role as simply that - service. They provide the services the customer wants, whether installing application upgrades across three departments in a financial services firm or providing technical help-desk facilities, to a pre-agreed SLA. In this way they deliver acceptable value. But do they see the creation of any additional value solely as the responsibility of the sales force?

Just as in other industries, selling organisations in the IT sector have groups of staff who are not in a sales role yet have regular and frequent customer contact. Indeed, in tough times - when customers are not routinely taking meetings with people who have "sales" in their job title - such service personnel are likely to have the most regular and frequent access to users.

So, if adding value is the way to retain and grow the customer base, and at the same time the sales team has increasingly restricted access to customers and prospects, the conclusion is inescapable. For the business to survive and prosper, it must lie with service personnel to create and deliver the necessary value.

Further, it is important to remember that today it is not only senior managers or procurement professionals that influence buying decisions. When every pound spent is under the microscope, it is the day-to-day contacts - the customers your service people meet - who are the real judges of your quality and the key influencers when it comes to a buying decision.

So are we advocating that you turn your service people into sellers? Not at all. The reason many people work in service functions is precisely because they enjoy customer contact but don't want to sell. As a result, any such efforts would be almost certainly doomed to failure and even potentially counter-productive. The key is that each organisation

- and each individual - can progress as far as their capabilities and willingness allow. In this way service moves closer to sales, but only as far as each person is both comfortable and willing to go.

So what are the stages along this service/sales continuum?

Service: at its simplest, the customer secures what they have asked for. They get the value they expect and the seller gets the agreed return. Any additional 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, often called 'going the extra mile'. The customer gets more value and the sales value, whilst still intangible, may be higher - such as the customer telling a friend or associate of their good experience.

Sales awareness: at this stage, the service person begins to look beyond the immediate service issue and actively seeks to create, or at least capture, potential tangible sales value. This may be fed back to the sales department to add further 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 have been recognised by the client, there is the added potential to create new, real customer value.

Sales through 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. Central to this is that 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 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 value 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 your service falling victim to an 'us and them' situation, with sales and service at best remote from each other and, at worst, openly hostile towards each other.

By equipping your service people with the willingness, recognition and skills to create value and move up the service/sales continuum in this way - and at a speed with which they feel comfortable - you can maximise the resulting opportunities to build a seamless organisation, creating real customer and sales value at every customer touch point, every time.