



## Tuning into the customer

You can't train your engineers to be salespeople but, says David Freedman of behaviour change consultancy, Huthwaite International, you can help them gain the skills to grow business from your existing customer base.

It is not just salespeople who interact with customers on a daily basis. In fact more and more interactions are being handled by non salespeople.

Recent research by industry analyst Gartner Group, for example, has shown that there is growing demand for professionals who can combine technical expertise with broader business skills. Further, it predicts that by 2010, some 60 per cent of technical staff will have business-facing roles.

As a result, some companies have started to look at such relationships from a very different perspective, as they recognise that every conversation could provide a selling opportunity. Such businesses, therefore, seek to create value at each customer touch point, irrespective of the job title of the employee or the reason for the contact.

And if this development reaches its logical conclusion, it will have a profound impact on the bottom line performance of the organisation, for it is often claimed that it is up to seven times more expensive to generate new business than it is to increase sales within existing customers.

Nowhere is this opportunity more pronounced than among on-site staff in the midst of a service contract – the people who spend a significant part of their working lives

on customers' premises and talking with the client's own staff.

Sometimes, of course, the effect will be limited. Where the sale is at its most transactional – for example with a dedicated software solution designed to solve a specific problem – the process of understanding needs and building value will happen primarily in the initial sale and be undertaken by dedicated sales professionals.

Yet even here, if the vendor company is small and less well-resourced, the chances are that those with a technical background or expertise may well have been given additional sales responsibility over time.

Where the Gartner analysis resonates most strongly is at an enterprise sales level and, in particular, in the enterprise IT services arena. Many vendor organisations have large pre-sales and technical teams involved before, during or following implementation of a system or solution. Such staff spend a significant amount of time in the company of their customers – though not ostensibly for the purposes of 'selling'.

Does this mean that implementation and delivery experts and those who have the day-to-day responsibility for performance now have to become salespeople in addition to their established technical skills? Probably not, since

this would not only meet with strong resistance but also be unnecessary.

What it does mean, however, is that any employees with customer-facing roles, however minor in the context of their overall responsibility, have to recognise that they have a part to play in the sales process.

The more technical people in the IT services delivery team are often ideally placed to play a crucial role at several stages of a purchasing decision. At the outset, during the period before a need is recognised by the customer – which we characterise as 'changes over time' – they may typically be the only representatives of the vendor in the account. And this is often when the 'seed corn' of the next sales opportunity is sown.

The support team skilled at spotting such opportunities has a number of additional advantages at this stage. The people they deal with are generally not commercial buyers, and they do not perceive this group as 'sellers'. As a result, they are far more likely to be open and candid about what the potential opportunity might be and provide a full, honest view of the situation.

Furthermore, because at this point there is no identified or established 'need', there is minimal competitive activity. And if any need is beginning to emerge – which may eventually result in a request for

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proposals - your people on the ground are in a good position to influence what it says. - The customer-based team thus has a distinctive and important role to play in the sales process - that of spotter and gatherer of sales intelligence. As a result, the first stage for any company seeking to ensure that every sales opportunity is identified and developed in this way is for staff to recognise that the role is now different.

Yet on site service staff are not, nor should try to be, salesmen: if they are perceived as such, the vendor company will lose the key advantage of being able to encourage candour from the client at this critical early stage of intelligence gathering. Indeed, doing it wrong, through clumsy attempts at 'selling', will almost certainly be worse than doing nothing at all, as it is likely to damage the essential level of trust at an individual level.

In the IT services world in particular however, the project team staff typically fulfils one key goal of anyone trying to 'sell': namely, that they get close to the customer, to the extent that they may even be permanently located inside the client's premises.

As a result, the chances are that they will see much more of the customer than their sales colleagues do: yet they cannot turn this to their company's advantage if they are not 'programmed' to initiate the appropriate kind of conversation.

It is reasonable to assume that, in any organisation facing a typical fast-changing technical landscape, there will be a number of what we

define as Implied Needs (statements of general dissatisfaction) and Explicit Needs (statements of desire for a solution) floating around in the ether, above the heads of on-site systems partner or vendor representatives.

Yet most non-sales staff are unaware of the 'radio traffic' of potential sales opportunities constantly going on around them: and more, just as the average car radio travelling up the M4 can enable listeners to access Radio Four but not the police network or Radio Tbilisi, so even those who recognise that it may be happening typically lack the right receiver or equipment to tune into the relevant 'radio messages'.

The first task therefore is to help services staff to recognise that there is a level of 'noise' going on which can, and should, be construed as potential sales opportunities - whether in the office or when they go to the pub together for lunch.

The next step is to provide them with the right 'equipment' to tune in effectively. There are two issues here: first, they do not know how to do it; and further, their technical counterpart is unlikely to be the person who will make the ultimate buying decision. Yet though they may not be directly involved in any decision to invest, they have a key part to play in kick-starting the process of uncovering and defining need.

So, though in terms of the vendor company's client development strategy they are not what we would define as the 'focus of power', they are important. They may, for example, be the 'focus of

receptivity' - the ideal conduit to get the vendor representative into the organisation at a more general or higher level.

Or, equally valuable, they may be the 'focus of dissatisfaction' - as the IT manager, say, who cannot get the level of server performance he needs at times of peak activity when reports are being run. In such a case, he may need a solution which enables off-line batch reporting during the night, so that he can meet the required sub-second response times for his large internal customer base during the day.

The vendor representative needs to recognise each of these when he sees it and know how to have the right kind of conversation - in effect, moving from operational customer engineer (or 'fixit') to more sales-orientated mode. And this must be done in a way which is both seamless and which creates the impression that the vendor company has a solution which can help solve the problem.

Again, the IT services representative has a head start here, in that they will know a lot about the prospective needs at the outset from working alongside their immediate counterpart. So they may be already aware of the problem with the server; what they may not know are the implications of this regular drop in performance on both the individual and the company as a whole.

What they need therefore are the right behaviours to deal with the focus of power, receptivity or dissatisfaction in ways that uncover needs and that create the

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opportunity to provide an appropriate solution.

In order for this then to be communicated effectively internally, there also need to be processes for encouraging dialogue between service support and sales. As part of this, a common language is required that enables an understanding of the need, whether problem or solution-centred - together with where the buyer is in their decision-making process and their level of influence in the buying decision.

This will provide essential, if sometimes small, pieces of the jigsaw which sales colleagues can build on to create a picture of both the client organisation's buying structure and the potential opportunity.

It is important to note that each step - from initial awareness through determining need to internal communication - can be trained. So, in learning how to recognise that something is 'going on', you need to have purposeful and broadly-based conversations beyond a purely functional discussion around the success or failure of your particular application or piece of the system.

The goal is to understand what else is happening in the company for which the vendor may be able to provide help or support. In the case of a billing software supplier, for example, this might be the potential for providing other elements of customer management, quality of service or network support infrastructure.

Underlying much of this is the need to adopt a structured

investigatory technique - such as Huthwaite's SPIN<sup>®</sup> model incorporating Situation, Problem, Implication and Need-payoff questions - in which the questions act as the tuner on your radio set, enabling you to get onto the right 'frequency' that is the client's need.

Almost without exception, the creation and realisation of any major selling opportunity will be a team effort, with a number of 'sellers' talking to several 'buyers', each of whom will be at different stages of readiness to buy.

In addition to the behavioural skills required by each participant therefore, a number of process skills will also be needed - to plot, record, share and update the unearthing of implied and explicit needs among the (sometimes virtual) team. A system will thus be required which enables this to take place easily and in real-time, in order to realise fully the fruits of the selling team's behavioural success.

To sell the solution successfully, all participants need to understand their role in the process. This has a number of implications.

The answer to any problem may incorporate some off-the-shelf features but almost will certainly have bespoke elements geared to the identified needs of the particular client. It is critical at each stage for every member of the vendor team to build and defend the value for those parts of the specification which have been individually tailored.

Equally, it is rare that the vendor organisation will be in a position to develop a bespoke response in isolation. Much more likely is that

the solution design will be the result of close collaboration between members of both organisations.

So the explicit need may not be expressed in terms of an off-the-shelf solution: rather, the need is met and the payoff demonstrated by joint work involving buyer and seller together. Having jointly developed a value proposition, the client has a level of ownership: as a result, not only will they find it harder to switch to another supplier, but with an internal sponsor or champion it will be easier for the vendor to sell higher up the client organisation.

So, the importance of IT service technical people in initiating and advancing the sales process cannot be overstated, as they will typically have greater direct contact with the customer - both more often and for longer periods - than their sales colleagues.

Nevertheless, don't expect companies to throw big budgets at turning technical experts into sales experts. What they should certainly be doing however is equipping and encouraging them to open their ears and be aware of what is happening around them.

The 'little acorn' of a chance remark picked up by the right antennae may ultimately turn into the 'great oak' of a major new contract in a different part of the client organisation.

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