

Olin Thompson

Advancing the business of software

Sales and Marketing's Number One Mistake By Olin Thompson

Where can we find sales and marketing's number one mistake? Looking at web sites, we see it. Looking at brochures, we see it. PowerPoint, we see it. On sales calls – that is when we see it most. It is amazing that almost every sales and marketing organization makes the very same mistake.

What is this number one mistake? It is failing to follow a rule we all learned in sales and marketing 101.

Think like the prospect.

Some examples may illuminate the problem.

- One software vendor stated they sold to C-Level decision makers. The vendor's web site featured technology. How many C-Level execs think about technology? How many of these C-Level execs know about operating systems and databases, let alone care?
- A vendor bragged about their focus on a specific vertical market. The vendor's home page did not mention that segment, not even a meaningful picture. Prospects think that focus on their kind of business is important. If you were an executive in that vertical and looking for a solution, would you bother to look beyond the vendor's home page to see if they served your segment?
- A vendor stated they had great references, their sales brochure did not mention that other companies used their product, let alone mention their names. Prospects think that references mean a vendor is more experienced and less risky. From the vendor's brochure, would most prospects assume that the vendor had no references?
- A vendor invented a new way to define a business need. They spend a lot of time defining their new idea but no place did they relate it to the vocabulary, used every day, of the buyer. Prospects can only think in the vocabulary that they bring to the situation. Will prospects figure out that this new term defines what they consider their old problem?

- A software company's introductory PowerPoint focused on the great features available in the most recent release. The sales and marketing team were excited about the new stuff but bored with the old stuff. Prospects do not think in terms of "old" and "new", it is all new to them. With the vendor focusing on the new stuff, will prospects know what is in the total product or assume that the "old stuff" is just missing?

If we do not understand, think like and talk like our prospects, are we communicating to our prospects? Communications has two sides, a sender and a receiver. If the receiver does not receive what the sender intended to be understood, communications has not taken place. It is the sender's responsibility to deliver a message that communicates. If communication does not take place, it is always the sender's fault. As sales and marketing professionals, we are the senders and it is our responsibility to communicate.

For communication to take place, the prospect must understand our words. Since the prospect only knows their words, sales and marketing must understand the prospect's vocabulary or they can never construct messages that communicate. Doing market research using a book or a web site can help with this knowledge, but rarely teach us all we need to know. Fully learning the market requires talking to the market. Existing customers are the best place to learn the vocabulary of the market. Sales and marketing must talk to customers; visit their locations, to understand the vocabulary of these businesses.

We all evaluate messages within the context of what we already know and this includes our prospects. Marketing messages must relate to the prospect's context. This is partly vocabulary but also things that are "common knowledge" in the industry -- business practices, industry traditions and current issues.

Common Flaws in Our Thinking

Talking to various sales and marketing professionals, we hear a number of common statements on this problem. Let us look at a few of the statements and understand why they reflect false thinking on our part.

- *The prospect is stupid.* Sorry, there has never been a stupid prospect, only stupid sales and marketing people. It is not the prospect's job to understand the sales person; it is the sales person's job to communicate effectively with the prospect. That is what salesmanship is! When a sales person thinks that a prospect is stupid, it simply means that the sales person has not taken the time, or does not have the ability, to figure out how to communicate to the prospect. When this excuse exists in a sales and marketing organization, it means two things, first they have not figured out how to communicate and they are arrogant, thinking themselves superior to the prospect.
- *The industry knows us.* You may have a long list of customers and great market presence, but that rarely translates into "everyone knows us". Even if the prospect knows who you are, do they have the knowledge and the image you want them to have? When talking to new prospects, always assume they know little about you, your company and your products.
- *We will just ask our customers.* This is usually a good step and not a bad one. However, customers by definition have already figured out what you are trying to tell them or they would not be customers. During a sales cycle, when a prospect starts using some of your vocabulary to define problems and solutions, you know you are communicating and probably winning. When you later go back to that

company to understand their vocabulary, the customer has already converted to some of your vocabulary and thinking and their value has lessened.

- *Focus on the exciting stuff.* This is not a bad communication strategy if the focus is on the stuff that is exciting to the prospect. Too often, the focus is on what is exciting to the sales and marketing team. Remember, what might be old and boring to you may be new and exciting to the prospect.
- *We can educate the prospect.* Yes, you can. However, education is different from selling. Educators may not win orders. They may spend a lot of time educating and never get much more than a thank you. It is much easier to leverage the knowledge that the prospect already has than get them to think differently or to learn and then apply new knowledge. There is a reason that it cost a lot of money to go to college, education is expensive. In the case of a sales organization, educating prospects means a high cost of sales, education is expensive.

As sales and marketing professionals, our job is communication. Communication means the prospect receiving and understanding the messages we want them to understand. To achieve communication, we need to think like our prospect. Not thinking like the prospect means that communication will be limited, non-existent, or even worse, have a negative impact, giving them a message different from what we intent to communicate.

About the author

Olin Thompson has over 25 years experience as an executive in the software industry with roles in general management, sales, marketing and business development. Olin advises software companies on strategy and tactics in business strategy, sales and marketing. He is a frequent author and an award-winning speaker on topics of interest to both software industry and end-user companies. Contact Olin at OT@OlinThompson.com.

