

Never mind the marketing message, what about the sales conversation? By Bob Apollo



If your organisation has a **complex sales process** that requires a series of interactions over several months with a **range of different stakeholders**, there's one thing that matters above everything else - the **effectiveness of your sales conversations**.

Not how much you spend on marketing, or how clever your campaigns are, or how distinctive your logo looks, or any of the other things marketers are tempted to spend time and money on. **Nothing matters more** than setting the scene for a series of effective sales conversations.

But here's the problem: far too many marketers seem to believe the job is done when their message has been delivered to the target audience, or a "lead" has been generated - but at that point the real heavy lifting has only just begun...

I believe that this "message-out" thinking is so engrained in so many marketers thinking that only a radically different perspective can overturn it. I am absolutely convinced that B2B marketers in complex new business environments need to turn through 180° and switch to a "conversation-first" approach.

Four key questions

Rather than pivoting around the message they intend to deliver, B2B campaign planning must start by answering four key questions:

- What sort of sales conversations do we intend to stimulate?
- Who do we intend to have these conversations with?
- What do we need to do to make more of these conversations happen?
- What do we need to do to make these conversations more effective?

Defining the desired conversation

When we start by thinking about the desired conversation, we are forced to pay attention to whom we want to talk to and what we want to talk to them about, and what we need to do to equip our sales people to have a productive discussions with them.

When I talk about a "productive discussion", I mean that the conversation proves to be a valuable use of both the prospect's and the sales person's time, and that if interest is successfully stimulated, the prospect happily agrees to take a defined next step.

Getting under the skin of the stakeholder

But if we're to achieve this, we need to really understand who our target stakeholders are and what they are likely to be interested in. It requires that we develop a set of insights that are going to pique their interest and make them want to hear more.

And it requires that we equip the sales person with a bunch of relevant insights, facts, anecdotes and stories that are going to engage the prospect's attention - and it requires that we equip them to ask thoughtful,

relevant questions that both parties end up learning from.

Re-prioritising our demand generation and thought leadership

Armed with this understanding of the outcome we want to create, we can work backwards to lay the foundations for the conversations we want to have. Our demand creation campaigns can be crafted with the prospect interaction in mind.

Our understanding of the conversations we want to stimulate can also help to inform our choice of thought leadership programmes, and help shape and prioritise the themes we want to communicate to the marketplace.

It all comes from **working backwards from the conversation**.

Eliminating wasted effort

One of the great benefits of this conversation-first thinking is that it can help to avoid a huge amount of wasted effort in creating marketing materials, campaigns and programmes that do nothing to set the scene or provide support for these all-important conversations.

And because this approach is impossible to execute without very close collaboration between the sales and marketing organisations, it facilitates a level of sales and marketing alignment that remains unfortunately all-too-rare in traditional B2B marketing organisations.

What you need to do now...

I suggest that you start by asking your field sales people how many of the "leads" from your current marketing campaigns are resulting in the right sort of sales conversations - and how well they feel equipped to convert their initial conversations into well-qualified opportunities. The answer - unless you've already adopted conversation-first thinking - is that there is probably a heck of a lot of scope for improvement. Involving the sales team might feel like an unnatural experience to start with. Thinking backwards from the desired conversation isn't the classical way to develop marketing campaigns.

But perhaps it ought to be. You'll almost certainly end up executing fewer but more effective campaigns. Your sales people will inevitably have more of the right sort of conversations. And the results - in terms of pipeline value and revenue generated - will indisputably be worth it.

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About the Author

Bob Apollo is the founder and Chief Strategist of Inflexion-Point Strategy Partners Ltd, a pioneering B2B sales and marketing performance improvement consultancy, based in Reading, UK. Inflexion-Point is one of the UK's leading B2B Sales and Marketing Performance Improvement specialists. Their research-led, evidence-based approach enables clients to increase pipeline values, shorten average sales cycles and improve average sales win rates. Bob now works with growth-minded organisations of all sizes to help them build scalable businesses. He has written hundreds of articles on the subject of sales and marketing performance, spoken at dozens of industry conferences and events, and blogs regularly for a range of thought-leading sites including Entrepreneur Country, My Venture Pad, The Customer Collective and CustomerThink.

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