

Business Marketing

Face to Face

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The Theory and Practice of B2B Marketing

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 Published by Goodfellow Publishers Limited, Woodeaton, Oxford, OX3 9TJ
<http://www.goodfellowpublishers.com>

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

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Personal Selling and Key Account Management

Overview

The importance of personal selling in the B2B communications mix should not be underestimated. Although all the tools can play a significant part in an organisation's overall marketing communications activities, personal selling, delivered through a sales force, has traditionally been the most potent. Personal contact and selling can be critical for the development of meaningful collaborative relationships between customers and suppliers.

In this final chapter, consideration is given to the role and characteristics of personal selling. However, the main thrust is centred on the impact of selling on interorganisational relationships and how the other communication tools can be blended to provide cost and communication effectiveness. In addition, issues concerning the management and organisation of the sales force are explored before concluding with an examination of key account management.

Aims and objectives

The main aims of this chapter are to consider the key characteristics of personal selling and to examine how this communication tool can best be used to influence the nature and shape of relationships between organisations and individual buyers and sellers.

The objectives of this chapter are to enable readers to:

- 1 Consider the role and tasks of personal selling.
- 2 Examine the characteristics of personal selling and determine when it should be a major part of the mix.
- 3 Evaluate the contribution sales force activities can and should make to the development of interorganisational relationships.
- 4 Appraise the effective mix of the communication tools for selling through multiple channels.
- 5 Appreciate the broad ways in which sales managers can manage the sales force.
- 6 Determine the role and key characteristics of key account management.

A Slice of Life – The Origin of Business

The sales function is always, always, always at the forefront of the business. Businesses are there to sell things and salespeople do the selling. Contrary to what you may have heard, products very rarely ‘sell themselves’, they have to be sold – even online businesses have learnt the hard way that they need to have ‘real people’ available to close sales. But it would be wrong to suppose that it is just the salespeople who sell. Everyone associated to a brand including the brand itself and indeed its customers are capable of selling the products or services. The less obvious sales activities are ‘indirect’. That leaves the sales and marketing teams slugging it out on the frontline for direct sales. And they do slug it out, but at some point, the sales and marketing functions have to work together – because the personal selling model is rarely, if ever, fully scalable.

The trigger is usually when the sales team simply can’t sell any more by themselves. There are only so many hours in the day and sales people are expensive. When a company can no longer achieve continued growth by selling ‘one to one’, their thoughts inevitably turn to selling ‘one to many’. In other words, they need marketing support. The obvious support comes in the form of marketing communications activity – campaign development and lead generation activities for example – but an important and often overlooked area of support is where marketing expertise helps make the sales activity more effective by positioning the brand and shaping the story it tells.

A large technology client recently set me just such a challenge. In an uncharacteristically frank briefing meeting, it was revealed that the sales team was struggling with its ability to articulate a complex technical message in a way that would attract sufficient sales growth. In a nutshell, the customers weren’t listening. The marketing team was used to providing tactical campaign support, but had yet to deliver a simple, compelling story that customers would relate to and engage with. So that became my challenge.

The category was ‘business intelligence’ and data analytics. It’s a bit dry. And a bit complex. Sandal-wearing maths professor territory. In essence, the company provided software that could analyse vast quantities of operational data from a business to provide management insight and decision making intelligence. Across every aspect of a large operation and across all market sectors, my client would use complex algorithms based on past and present data, to predict the future. Creepy, but cool. Management teams within customer organisations could use the results of the data analysis to make quicker and better decisions. Who in business wouldn’t want that decision making capability? Who could resist a crystal ball to see into the future of the organisation and make changes to affect outcomes? Almost no one actually. My client was hugely successful – an established, multi-billion dollar, global