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Market Your Message

Michael Bosworth explains how to customize your sales story for every account

By *Kim Wright Wiley*

Target New Businesses & New Homeowners



All sales start with a story. The stories are sometimes

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comfortably familiar – as in, “Let me tell you about our new line of corn chips” – and sometimes require the listener

to enter an entirely new world – as in, “Let me tell you about our new Penilex CompuDrive 7000 XJP.” But one thing’s for sure: The more technical the product, the clearer the story needs to be.



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When George Eastman sold his first camera, people hardly knew what a camera was, much less why they needed it or what they could do with it. Eastman came up with a simple, powerful and reassuring message: “You press the button, and we do the rest.” Kodak salespeople carried that message to the people, who quickly got the picture.

People didn’t know what cameras were back when Kodak first hit the market, and nobody knew what marketing was either. The advertising manager ran the sales department. He created the message, the advertisement, the customer testimonials and the direct-mail pieces. The package was passed down to the sales manager, then to the salesman and finally to the customer.

Marketing in the year 2002 is a bit more complicated. “Draw a big circle on a piece of paper,” says Charles Orlando, director of marketing at Pixion, an online Web-conferencing company. “Then put a small dot in the middle. The dot is your message; the circle is your market.” Every day, customers are bombarded by sales messages, often for products that are far too complex to be explained in a one-line catchphrase. The end result? When they’re overwhelmed by stimuli, customers can shut down faster than a malfunctioning Penilex CompuDrive 7000 XJP.

Ironically, in this age when the message needs to be as clear as possible, the people creating the message, i.e., the marketing department, are miles away from the people delivering the message, i.e., the sales force. Separated by layers of



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bureaucracy, marketing and sales departments may give lip service to the idea “We’re all on the same team,” when the reality is closer to “I have no idea what game they’re playing.”

What’s the nature of this rift? Marketing focuses on data geared toward the theoretical customer while sales focuses on relationships with a real customer. The salespeople meet the marketing people only when new products are introduced – they may parachute in for special presentations, but aren’t in the field to respond to ongoing questions and concerns. While salespeople have to constantly justify their existence by closing sales and producing hard numbers, marketing is judged by a more loosey-goosey standard.

“Typically, marketing and sales are separate silos in the company,” says Michael Bosworth, a founder of Customer Centric Systems and co-author with John Holland of the new book *CustomerCentric Selling: The Message Driven Sales Process* (McGraw Hill, 2003). “They point fingers at each other; they blame each other for their problems. At one point or another, the chief sales officers at most of the technology companies I’ve worked with have looked me in the eye and told me that marketing is irrelevant as far as making their sales forces more effective.”

Behind closed doors, salespeople have a lot of gripes. The marketing guys come in late and leave early. They never wear ties; they’re always at lunch. They’re flaky, they’re arty and most of their brochures are totally useless. The bottom line is, these guys never have to justify the bottom line.

Marketing people respond with an even bigger insult. They secretly believe that the purpose of all great marketing is to make sales unnecessary.

The Message Should Drive the Sales Process

So, can this marriage be saved?

Michael Bosworth thinks it can. The solution lies in collaborating to make the messages generated by the marketing department more sales relevant.

Bosworth calls his system the “message-driven sales process” and says it is like a ladder. “On the left side of the ladder we have the sales process – the steps salespeople take from the initial customer interview to the close of the sale. On the right side we have the sales message. Every step of the way, the message has to be tailored, customized and targeted to the unique and specific needs of the customer.”

In other words, rather than the sales department being the passive recipient of whatever message marketing happens to cook up, in a message-driven sales process marketing tailors that message specifically to what sales tells them it needs. Instead of being handed down from on high, the sales message is built from the ground up. “The solution is to give companies a standard format of sales-ready messaging that their sales department would be willing to use,” says Bosworth. “You have to join the two – architect the integration of the sales process and messaging.”

“Marketing has traditionally been focused on getting out the message at the highest levels,” says Charles Orlando. “But at the end of the day, marketing’s real job is to be the in-house consultant for the sales department.” Orlando has the reputation of a master marketer; he designed a Super Bowl commercial to introduce the idea of Web conferencing using RuPaul as his pitchman. (“And that’s using the term ‘pitchman’ very loosely,” he jokes.) Like George Eastman, Orlando had the challenge of telling people they needed something that they didn’t know existed. “The idea that you can have meetings on the Web was a totally new message,” he says.

Although it may have ended up in the rarefied air of Super Bowl ads, Orlando began to shape his message by tagging along on sales calls. “I went out on 50 or 60 calls because I wanted to hear both the good and the bad,” he says. “Marketing doesn’t believe in listening to the bad because generally they drive their programs strategically. I drive my programs tactically. In order for marketing to write the most effective message, they have to have a face-to-face, eyeball-to-eyeball experience with the customer.”

Orlando also asked plenty of questions of his sales team. “I needed to know ‘What are the pain points during the sales process? What tools are missing from their battle chest? How can I make their life easier?’” he says. “Here at Pixion it’s a very collaborative effort – we don’t build things in a box in marketing and ship it out to sales. It’s has to be interactive because that’s the only way we’re ever going to get ahead.”

Messages Can Move the Conversation to a Happy Conclusion

Dennis Dunlap, CEO of the American Marketing Association, also believes that messaging must originate in sales. “The key is providing salespeople with the information that gives them the opportunity to have an intelligent conversation with a potential buyer.”

To Bosworth it comes down to a simple scenario. “Let’s say a journeyman salesperson, a young guy in his twenties, needs to have a meaningful dialogue with a 55-year-old enterprise executive who is considering spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on technology that he doesn’t understand. The message should allow the young salesperson to relate to this executive by his title and have a conversation about a specific goal that person would have.” He emphasizes the word conversation, saying, “A good conversation accomplishes a lot more than a one-sided presentation.”

Messages only resonate in the customer’s mind if they are shaped in words and portrayed in images that the customer can understand. Bosworth gives the example of a salesperson presenting a CRM package to a VP of sales. “One of the features is that the VP of sales has control over who in his organization has access to what information. Now that’s a feature, and some customers will be able to immediately think of uses for it and others won’t. Let’s say it’s an industry with high employee turnover; the salesperson could say, ‘What if you heard that one of your top salespeople was going to leave you to go work for another company? What if, from wherever you were, even if you were traveling,

you could go into the system and stop that salesperson's ability to download customer data on file? Would that be useful to you?"

The message works because it's so specific. Showing a client exactly how he could use a product to protect his company's assets during times of employee turnover is a far cry from saying something generic like, "We have a data security feature in our product." With the right messaging – delivered at the heels of a few targeted questions – a 28-year-old can sell the system to a 55-year-old in a language that the 55-year-old can understand.

Bosworth, the apostle of message management, emphasizes the need for meaningful conversation with the customer: "Salespeople who tell customers what they need are perceived as presumptuous. Customers are only willing to explore new ideas if the salesperson can talk about subjects that have priority and matters that are meaningful to the customer. Trust grows to the degree a salesperson's message resonates in the customer's heart and mind."

Messages Must Match the Market and Meet the Buyer's Interest

Of course, it's easier to meet your customers' needs if you know what those needs are. Bosworth suggests that salespeople should first establish a certain amount of rapport with a potential client, using early conversations to gather information. "The important thing is to get the buyer to state a goal or need. If he doesn't offer it up front, the salesperson can suggest some potential goals that line up with the buyer's job title. Maybe offer a menu: 'I don't know about you, Mr. VP of Sales, but the goals we hear most from other VPs of sales is that they'd like to be able to forecast more accurately or that they want to shorten the sales cycle.'"

But as on the game show *Jeopardy!* you'll be penalized if you forget to phrase it in the form of a question. "People don't like to be told what they need," Bosworth cautions. "They want to be asked. But if you suggest possibilities, maybe the prospect can relate to one of those goals. He'll say 'Oh yeah, our sales cycles are too long...' He's now admitted a goal."

Once he's gotten the client to state a goal, the salesperson can use messaging to create some usage scenarios. Each scenario would have an action built into it – a specific way the product or service being sold would help this VP of sales shorten his sales cycle. It also helps to fine-tune the message depending on to whom you're pitching your product. What attributes of the system are most helpful to a CFO? What would a CIO need? In a complex sale that will affect many layers of a company, each player has different needs. It's not enough to simply show how the product can be used to solve A problem – you need to be able to say, "This is how the product can help you solve YOUR problem."

Marketers often create messages that are exclusively focused on product features, not customer benefits. Clients don't have an interest in product knowledge; they're already swamped with work, and this is just something new they have to learn. To approach these people with a list of 21 things your product can do is counterproductive. Give them too much information and the buyer may conclude it's more trouble than its worth.

“If you have different target customers within specific vertical markets, you need to be able to speak to all of them,” says Charles Orlando. “Whereas a CEO might want to talk about the actual payback and increased productivity, the CIO might want to talk about ease of integration.” A salesperson that delivers a targeted message for each contact is going to be far ahead of a competitor who is pitching the same boilerplate presentation to everybody.

Bosworth emphasizes the need for value-added solutions. “People will always listen to someone they think can help them solve their problems, so the most successful sales messages give concrete answers to that burning question ‘What’s in it for me?’”

Customer Message Management Systems

The idea of customizing sales presentations isn’t really new. John Henry Patterson of National Cash Register created a system in 1897 in which his salespeople had to follow a specific nine-step process for demonstrating a cash register. Patterson’s sales manual contained the 20 most likely objections salespeople might encounter and answered those objections by responding to the customer’s unique problems. At the end of the presentation, the salespeople showed a grocer a flyer that had printed testimonials from other grocers, a restaurant owner a testimonial letter from another restaurant owner, and so on. After all, Patterson reasoned, “A baker won’t believe a testimonial from a butcher.”

So top-notch salespeople have been trying to fine-tune and customize their messages for years – but compared to the NCR salesman of 1897 with his single sales manual, today’s salesperson deals with a staggering amount of information. Lisa Gregg, the director of sales development at American Express (see sidebar), says, “Our company had more than 100 different databases that we were asking our salespeople to master. The challenge was ‘How could we take all these things, identify the good and necessary parts, fix the things that are broken, and then blend it up for the salesperson to drink?’”

The man who turned out to have his finger on the blend button was Tiom Reisterer, VP of Ventaso. While Michael Bosworth originated the blueprint of the message-driven sales process, Ventaso provided the means to implement it, by developing a system called Customer Message Management that allows salespeople to tap into a sales and marketing intelligence center. The engine allows a company to inventory and organize a tremendous amount of sales and marketing content and serve up customized messages to its sales force.

Ventaso helped American Express develop a Web-based portal to help salespeople access relevant sales messages and create very focused documents. “The process is similar to sales coaching,” says Reisterer. “Salespeople go through a quick query, tell the system about the sales opportunity, pick a document, and then the system automatically pulls the needed pieces of information. It will build a document that fits both their sales process and their marketing for branding guidelines and gives the customers only the information they care about.”

Thus, with very little effort field people can create targeted messaging. They can get customized white papers for different industries, custom-tailored market data sheets, and PowerPoint presentations that are designed to zero in on the specific interests of the person who will be viewing the presentation. If a saleswoman is going out that afternoon to see several officers at a corn chip plant, she can use the messaging template to create a custom sales presentation for first the VP of production, then the CEO, and finally the VP of sales. The result is no more canned brochures that nobody reads and no more marketing documents that are out of date before they're in the the customer's hands.

A Good Message Is Like Medicine for the Customer's Pain

Why does a song tug at people's heartstrings? Because the songwriter uses a language that skillfully expresses what people think and feel. One of the reasons why it is so difficult for marketing departments to create the right messages for the sales force is that they don't know enough about what their customers think and feel.

Bosworth recalls a workshop where he asked a man who sold glue to tell him about the glue. A chemist by training, the man cheerfully went through all the properties of glue – talking about surfaces and temperatures and stickiness factors and completely going over everyone's head. "He saw glue as a noun," says Bosworth. "I asked him to use glue as a verb, and he immediately began telling me about things I could do with this glue. It was a much more compelling presentation."

The problem with marketing brochures, reports and white papers is that they're noun oriented," Bosworth continues. "They say 'Here's what we are' and not 'Here's what you can do with us.' It's the job of the salesperson to figure out how the customer can use the product – especially if it's something brand new – but marketing can help."

Charles Orlando agrees. "Technology companies often refer to their product as if it were an 'it,'" he says, "and traditional marketing glorifies the product instead of matching the benefits to the pain points. Marketing departments need to know which questions the clients are asking."

Perhaps not all marketing people are prepared to go out on sales calls like Orlando, but they can all seek feedback from salespeople by asking them, "Where does the client hesitate? Where is the sales process stalling? What else does the client need to know?" Once this information is in hand, marketing materials can be designed to relate to those specific pain points. Sales is no longer just delivering marketing's message, but is also actively working to shape what that message is.

Ideally, a salesperson equipped with good sales messages can act as a diagnostician and alleviate the customer's pain. What about the consequence of poor messaging? If the message is weak, off target, poorly expressed or delivered late, the salesperson will end up feeling the pain of not winning the sale.

Why Message Management Must Be Mission Driven

A major problem has always been the lack of measurable connections between marketing content and the revenue-generating activities of a company, but a sales-focused marketing approach actually gives the marketing department a real report card, a way of measuring their impact on the bottom line.

Dennis Dunlap, president of the American Marketing Association, says, “In the past 10 years marketing has gotten more competitive and bottom line-driven. For a long time marketing didn’t have the tools necessary to justify its investments against a matrix of results. Customer Message Management not only helps them justify their expenditures, but also helps them make the best use of their marketing budget.” A message-driven sales process can help sales and marketing share a mutual goal of increased revenue generation. For once they really are playing on the same team. Another advantage of Customer Message Management is that it promotes brand consistency.

Savvy VP’s of sales and marketing realize that good customer-message management has to be a reflection of a company’s brand culture. Harvard’s Dr. David Shore told Selling Power, “A successful brand culture allows people with a common focus to speak with a strong voice, share a strong vision and pursue a common goal with a passion.”

Building a brand culture begins with articulating a company’s mission, vision and values. Says Dr. Shore, “If your employees don’t know the mission that spells out the noble purpose of your organization, if they don’t know why you are in business, how are they going to most effectively support your cause?”

A message-driven sales process must be deeply rooted in the company’s mission to insure brand consistency. Comprehensive message management insures consistency that makes the salespeople less likely to become free agents or loose cannons out in the field, saying whatever it takes in order to make the sale. The data sheets, usage scenarios and white papers keep the messaging consistent throughout all departments, even when a sales force is remote or distributed all over the country. With a strong message-management program in place, a CEO can be sure that his salespeople in Seattle are promising the same things they’re promising in Miami.

Correctly used, a message-driven sales process is the ultimate win-win-win situation. Customers get their needs met without a lot of hoopla. Marketing creates messages that impact the bottom line and enhance the brand. And sales? With intelligent customer-message management systems giving them the kind of backup they need, salespeople can in turn meet individual customer needs without spending hours behind a desk. It’s only logical that a system created to make things easier for clients would ultimately make things easier for salespeople as well.

As George Eastman would say, “You press the button, and we do the rest.”