

Sales & Service: The Hottest Propositions

Editor's Note: This is part three of a three part series, "Sales and Service: Creating the Winning Combination."

Thus far in this series we have determined the appropriate leadership strategies for creating the sales/service link and identified appropriate strategies for dealing with the inevitable conflicts that accompany change. Now, we're going to put it all together so that your business model clearly reflects the sales/service link.

Begin the process of revising your business model by asking three critical questions:

- 1) What is your unique sales proposition?
- 2) What is your unique service proposition?
- 3) How are the two linked?

These three questions will enable you to begin revising your strategy so that your sales and service propositions are clearly linked. If in answering these questions, you find that either you have no unique service proposition, no unique sales proposition or the ones you have are in no way connected, you have a great opportunity to begin identifying a strategy that will compel a different level of action in the organization. Many in the OEM/VAR marketplace respond to these questions with absolute clarity about the sales proposition, but the service proposition escapes them until there is a crisis or problem.

Case in point: George owned a thriving office equipment business that he and his father built from the ground up. He successfully expanded the business into neighboring counties and eventually into two more states. As the business grew it became clear that revenue growth was the driving force behind almost every business decision. But revenue growth at the cost of customer satisfaction

was becoming the norm. More and more often, George and his managers were getting complaints about everything from late deliveries to malfunctions to salespeople stretching the truth. George's approach to customer satisfaction was to "just make it right and move on." Well, that crisis management approach only works for a little while. Rather than just making it right with each individual customer, why not create internal systems that make it right for every customer?

Creating the Service Proposition

Begin creating an effective internal system for customer satisfaction by taking the time to identify characteristics of exceptional service that your company embodies or aspires to embody. This is the crux of your unique service proposition. Just as identifying your unique sales proposition enables you to set the standard for sales and revenue growth, identifying a service proposition enables you to set the standard for service. This will enable you to create an identity that spotlights service. Your service proposition, when it is translated into



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action, lets customers know that it is to their advantage to do business with you. They will continue making purchases not just because of product and price, but also because of the high level of service that they receive from your company.

Make it Work for Your Company

Once you have identified the characteristics you deem most desirable, the next step is to figure out how each person in the company, regardless of his job, title or position, can incorporate that characteristic into his work. For example, one VAR determined that product knowledge and courtesy were two critical components that would define its service proposition. Having identified this characteristic, the company determined that there was no one in the organization who did not need at least cursory knowledge of most of what they sold. This meant that education about product specifications and capabilities had to be provided to everyone, not just the salespeople and the service technicians.

The company's emphasis on product knowledge did more than create a cadre of knowledgeable employees; it also made a clear link between sales and service. It is far easier to sell and cross-sell when you have intimate knowledge of a wide array of products. The VAR's service proposition supported its sales objectives.

Does Your Sales Staff Support Service?

An emphasis on the sales/service link will require a company, be it a VAR, an OEM or a dealership, to take a long, hard look at the mechanics of the sale. Are its salespeople encouraged to go for the jugular so that they keep earning fat commission checks, or do they have an understanding of consultative selling and its relational components? When sales managers have a singular focus on revenue targets and ignore the service component, they breed a group of bloodsucking salespeople who feed off of unsuspecting customers. Okay, I admit I may have overstated that just a little bit, but you get my point.

Sales managers have to teach their people to look beyond today's one-shot sale for larger opportunities to sell both the company's products and its phenomenal service, both technical service and customer service. Further, sales managers have

to be adept at encouraging the sales staff to work collaboratively with the technical staff.

One organization did this by linking bonuses. While service technicians had always been encouraged to let the sales team know of opportunities for future business, they actually started doing just that when they got compensated for it. Service technicians who brought in leads shared a bonus (with the salesperson) on those deals. Rather than keeping the adversarial relationship that had been evident between the two departments, this move got them working together to increase revenue for the entire organization.

Managers at another company decided that since they were always taking the salespeople to dinners and lunches to celebrate their victories, they should try a company-wide celebration when quarterly targets were reached. This didn't cost a dime more and it exponentially raised the esprit d'corps. People throughout the organization felt they were valued members of the team.

At yet another large corporation, managers decided to make sure no one ignored service. In order for salespeople to get their monthly bonuses, the entire company had to attain a certain score on the monthly customer satisfaction index. This made the company's commitment to service very, very tangible.

Summary

Linking sales and service is not the impossible dream. It does require a high level of commitment to changing the company's approach to sales, customer relationship management and conflict management. This means business as usual will no longer do.

Once you have started considering your sales and service propositions, you can then work on revising your approach to customer satisfaction. Consider practical strategies you can employ to engage everyone so that your reputation for service catapults you beyond your competition. And remember, everything you do to provide better service increases the chance for repeat sales. **■**

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