

ICDL says companies must adapt to changing customer needs to win sales

Fresh thinking, differentiation, and market insight lead to competitive advantage

Research from Harvard and Warwick Universities highlights the fact that customers' needs are changing faster today than ever before, fuelled by the 21st Century's 'information society'. But even in this climate of constant change, price stubbornly remains a consideration; it is now, however, rarely the most important factor when customers choose one supplier over another. Andrew Dugdale, Chairman of ICDL, a leading strategic sales and marketing training and research organisation says:

"In order to succeed in the new cut throat economy of the 21st Century, suppliers need to better understand what it is that customer's are really looking for, which often turns out to be some way away from the supplier's current positioning. They need to provide more than just a cost effective cure for their customer's pains. There are simply too many vendors out there in the marketplace who just cure their customers' pains; yet whilst they may take some pain away, they do not leave the customer any stronger, any more differentiated or any more competitively advantaged than they were before. This is no longer good enough".

Suppliers in today's cut throat market need to clearly differentiate themselves by evidencing to their customers what value they create for their customers' business and showing clearly how they don't just remove pain, but uniquely, leave their customers better prepared to win business than other suppliers.



Many sales methodologies around in today's market are based on thinking that originated in the combative sales marketplaces of the 80's and 90's and no longer give companies that competitive edge. Why, because the focus is too rooted in polishing up the supplying organisations offerings to make them look better than the competitions offerings. This is often misnamed 'Value Add'. Is this enough? Surely the focus today needs to be on giving the customer a real competitive edge in their marketplace, not just on supplying more 'stuff'. Sales methodologies that do not apply this approach are past their sell-by date. They struggle to create competitive advantage or fresh thinking in the companies that implement them. They are no longer unique and fail to stir up any excitement in the minds of the customer. The game has moved on.

The approaches pioneered by some sales methodologies still seem very introspective rather than customer centric. Fine, every company needs to know its core competencies – understand its strengths and weaknesses when compared to its competitors – but the key element of any strategy is customers: what's hurts them, what heals them, what makes them stand out above the rest in the market, what pleases them, what inspires them, what makes them or you more attractive, what they perceive to be 'value', and what triggers an action to buy from you.

This is the message that is being given on a daily basis by Dugdale, who states:

"According to feedback from ICDL's customers, who rank amongst the worlds top organisations in their fields, ICDL is unique in our ability to drive net new thinking into sales and marketing teams which results directly in the rapid creation of competitive advantage and differentiation for our customers."

Don't push; pull in customers

Pushing products or solutions at customers with no understanding of what ails them does not create competitive advantage, or added value. Sometimes customers need help to realise their own potential; there may be opportunities that they may not have yet identified, they may not fully understand the challenges that face them, they may not understand how their competitors are reacting to a challenge, or what it would take for them to become the market leader.



The time has passed for the 'walking product catalogue' sales person – they are the 21st Century's dinosaurs. Without detailed knowledge and training in how to achieve maximum performance, companies will not be able to compete as effectively as they could or should within their chosen markets. The trouble is that most companies take an introspective view of their market, looking at the outside world from their perspective, rather than an outside-in approach, where they look at their world from the customer's perspective. Outside-in uniquely enables a full understand of every element of the competitive environment, particularly customer needs, and the emergent market drivers achieved through structured market analysis.

ICDL goes beyond healing

Additional value only comes from going beyond the healing of customers' pains. Value is only partly achieved by selling customers products, services and solutions that match their expectations and needs. ICDL takes its customers one step further than anyone else in the market. Simon Dando, Business Development Director of Carillion Construction a \$7bn UK based corporation, has the following to say about ICDL:

"ICDL has changed the way Carillion does business by changing the mindsets of our account directors to a focus on the language and value of our client's customers, rather than focusing internally into our world. As a result, Carillion is now always two steps ahead of our competition and fully engaged at a strategic level with our customers".

Customers don't always understand value

There are a couple of lessons that emerge from this: 'Differentiate or die', says Jack Trout in his book of the same name, never assume that customer knows what kind of value your company and its offerings represent. Evidence has to be provided that more value will be added by working with you as opposed to one of the others within your market.

Dugdale was recently interviewed as part of the development of the Institute of Direct Marketing's new B2B marketing qualification, and explained the process:

“The needs of end users within any given market need to be clearly understood, because it is only then that you can be really sure you understand the drivers within a market. The market needs can then be analysed out and mapped to your organisation’s capabilities and the value you deliver becomes clear.
‘Every business in is a growth business’

Ram Charan and Noel Tichy in their book ‘Every business is a growth business’, published by Three Rivers Press say: “Growth is a hot topic today. Business leaders who have been through the wringers of repetitive downsizing, re-engineering, and all the rest, are discovering that they must now focus not only on operational excellence but also on growth. Incremental market share gains alone won’t secure a future for their companies. There’s nowhere else to go now; literally, they either grow or die”, they explain. The two authors stress the following:

- 1 There is no such thing as a mature business...so get this out of your head...
- 2 Not all growth is good...but good growth is sustainable, profitable and capital efficient...
- 3 Growth is a mentality created by a company’s leadership...and this includes the leadership and skills development of salespeople...
- 4 Balanced growth is the key to prosperity...
- 5 Growing is less risky than not growing...

Growth is achieved by knowing your markets, your suppliers, your customers and their customers. From a sales perspective this means that companies have to shift their thinking to the customer side of the desk. It’s no longer a case of selling on the basis of the bells and whistles of the product, which won’t necessarily talk the language that customer needs to hear in order to perceive sufficient added value, to buy it.



When your sales approach needs reinvigorating and you are looking for a vendor, perhaps you should ask yourself if their approach is really going to create significant competitive advantage, differentiation, and of course value for your customers, and their customers.

By Graham Jarvis MA, ACIM, MCIJ, M IDM
Editor, The Marketing Leaders
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For more information on how ICDL can help you, call us today on +44 (0)118 979 8433
or e-mail enquiries@thebusinessaccelerators.com

Intellectual Capital Development Limited
Longstaff House, 47a Denmark Street
Wokingham, Berkshire RG40 2AY
T: 0870 203 1010
T: +44 (0)118 979 8433
F: +44 (0)118 979 9998
enquiries@thebusinessaccelerators.com
www.thebusinessaccelerators.com

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