

## Death Of The Sales People?

*Not yet. But to survive in the digital economy, the modern salesperson needs to learn an important lesson: Educate, don't pitch.*

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I was watching reruns of *The Office* this summer with my children.

As you may know, the sit-com shows life in the Scranton, Pennsylvania, branch of a fictional office supply company, Dunder Mifflin. In one episode, the star sales person, Dwight Schrute, finds himself losing a sales contest to the company's new website.

I felt we were watching the 21st-century version of *Death of a Salesman*, the 1949 play about a struggling salesperson who fails to adapt to his changing world.

### **Are Sales People Still Needed?**

According to new conventional wisdom, Dwight is not the only salesperson being supplanted by technology. I regularly find myself in senior management meetings discussing issues related to my client's sales organization. Inevitably someone will bring up the "fact" that 70% of the buying process now takes place before the prospect wants to engage with a sales person.

After all, so much information is available online that sales people are thought to be unnecessary in the early stages of the process. As a result, marketing people are now heroes and salespeople just show up and take orders.

Is this really true? Are sales people today nothing more than order takers? If it is true, then you should be able to get by with 70% fewer sales people than you had 10 years ago.

I don't think this is the case.

Obviously, buyers are doing a lot of research online. But that doesn't mean that they don't need or welcome the services of a salesperson.

### **Sales Provides More Value with Higher-Risk Purchases.**

My experience working with sales and marketing organizations indicates the greater the buyer risk, the more they value sales people throughout their buying process. Purchasing commodity office supplies may not require a lot of salesperson interaction. (Sorry Dwight).

However, when buyers make decisions regarding a major purchase requiring a significant investment and risk, buyers want to engage with sales people early and often.

New research from the Information Technology Services Marketing Association (ITSMA), confirms my experiences. ITSMA provides a new perspective on that 70% statistic. They have found through their extensive research that 70% of B2B buyers want to engage with sales people early in the sales process. ITSMA did the research with almost 300 senior executives who were buying complex solutions valued at over \$500,000.

These were high-risk projects. And the higher the customers' perceived risk, the greater the buyer's desire to have salesperson involvement early and often. So for sales organizations, this means earlier engagement leads to more wins.

### **Educate, Don't Pitch**

However, there is a catch. ITSMA found that buyers are looking for salespeople to add value during the early stages of their buying process. They do not want to deal with salespeople who just show up and pitch products and highlight features. To remain relevant, salespeople must provide ideas and information that will help their customers gain a competitive advantage or solve a business problem.

According to Julie Schwartz, senior VP of research at ITSMA, and author of the research, "Buyers want salespeople who can educate them on the issues and opportunities in their industry. They are looking for trusted resources who help them select the best approach to deal with their specific challenges."

So the role of the salesperson is changing quickly. They must provide fresh insights and perspective to their prospects. And if they are not the subject matter experts, they must understand when and how to leverage their company's experts.

### **Marketing and Product Management Must Enable Sales.**

However, the need to engage differently with buyers is not just on the heads of the sales people. The roles for marketing and product management must evolve as well.

Sales people should not be left alone to make up this value stuff. Someone must provide the salespeople with the knowledge and the tools to offer fresh insights and challenge customers thinking. And those someones are the marketing and product teams.

This requires the marketing and product teams to do their homework and come up with industry and account-specific insights. These insights should be packaged in a way that can be easily understood and used during selling opportunities by the salespeople. The goal is to

get the salespeople comfortable having business conversations without ever mentioning a product or service.

Here is a partial list of what the marketing and product teams should provide:

- Account-specific business insights
- Thought-provoking statistics about key industry changes
- Provocative questions that make customers uncomfortable with the status quo and as a result provide them with valuable insights
- Case studies that demonstrate the value of your products and services
- Slide decks that contain thoughts and ideas, not just feature overviews
- Description of which customer segments will most appreciate the value you deliver
- Pricing models based on value that can be easily explained by the sales team
- Sales training on how to have conversations based on value so that they can avoid selling on price

### **Actually Salespeople are More Important Than Ever**

The ITSMA data should be welcome news to any sales organization selling into a risk averse market. Rather than questioning the relevance of salespeople, the data shows that salespeople are more important than ever.

Sales and marketing must collaborate on identifying the value you provide and how best to communicate that value.

Salespeople are far from becoming irrelevant. Instead of witnessing the 21st-century version of *Death of a Salesman*, we have now entered the era of the value-focused sales organization.

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