Making the consensus sale; you have to align all the decision makers.

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**Article At a Glance:**

Based on extensive research, this study by the Corporate executive Board (CEB) builds on their idea of the challenger sale by providing strategies by which salespeople can better understand the diversity that exists in the decision making unit of the customer and work on making sure that the diversity does not drive apart the customers from a key decision. On the contrary successful salespeople work on developing a consensus in the decision making unit of the customer and using this to drive home the sale. The various strategies to help consensus are then elaborated in the article.

**Defining the problem**

The biggest change in sales and marketing today is how customers buy. Conventionally sales representatives where taught to single out the final decision maker in order to seal the deal. Now the authority to make a purchasing decision lays with groups of individuals. A buying team on average contains 5,4 decision makers that have different priorities, functions and geographies. The art of sales today consists of bridging those differences and creating consensus within the buying team.

**Customer consensus: three key conclusions**

In recent surveys conducted by the Corporate Executive Board, of more than 5000 stakeholders, involved in B2B purchasing, diverse issues associated with group purchases were investigated: from buying-group demographics to purchase-process dynamics to individual behaviour. The surveys spanned a wide range of industries, geographies and go-to-market models. There were three main conclusions:

1. **Personalization can backfire**

Conventional wisdom concerning personalization is that the more a message is personalized, the more effectively it will drive a sale. In buying teams however, sending a differentiated personalized message to each individual might highlight the different priorities and goals within a team and hinder consensus. The customer stakeholders within a buying team should be connected to each other, not to the supplier individually.
2. Achieving consensus is hardest early in the buying process

The purchasing process is typically divided into three stages: problem definition, solution identification and supplier selection. B2B buyers stated that the identification of a solution and agreement about which course best to follow, was generally the most difficult phase. While suppliers should be helping a customer to reach consensus, they generally focus most on the third stage, trying to convince the customer to choose them. A supplier should realize that customer consensus more often than not has fallen apart before they even enter the scene. Sales representatives should proactively overcome disconnections among stakeholders before engaging in sales.

Achieving customer consensus also presents an opportunity for marketing because they are better positioned to foster consensus. They have tools that can reach customers more effectively during the critical consensus-building process and by combining customer knowledge from sales and own market research, they can identify patterns of customer behaviour and broad customer insights which they can translate into scalable marketing approaches.

3. Willingness to buy and willingness to advocate are not the same

To gain better access to the individuals of the buying teams a supplier needs a mobilizer, an advocate inside the customer organization. Effective use of a mobilizer depends on the willingness and the ability of a person to mobilize. A study revealed that only half of the people interested to buy a product were also willing to publicly advocate it. This reluctance to be an advocate stems from the perceived risk of losing respect or credibility inherent in fighting for change and promoting consensus. The fear also increases drastically as the size of a buying team increases. This perceived risk represents a huge obstacle for suppliers that seek to leverage mobilizers and create consensus.

A study showed that mobilizers are most inspired by provided personal value, like career advancement or better leadership skills, than by business value provided to the mobilizer’s organization. Suppliers still emphasize the wrong elements, addressing organizational risks and rewards, instead of focussing on personal risk and appeal. Marketing has a key role in encouraging mobilizers and equipping them to build consensus. Even when a mobilizer is willing and able, he or she will still need support.

**Building customer consensus: 3 identified strategies**

**STRATEGY 1: PRIMING CUSTOMER BUYING GROUPS FOR AGREEMENT BY CREATING A COMMON LANGUAGE AND SHARED PERSPECTIVES AROUND A PROBLEM AND A SOLUTION**

Shareholders in a buying team will have overlapping but distinct and sometimes conflicting interests. Helping those stakeholders see their shared interests will create a basis for consensus and make it easier for mobilizers to advocate on your behalf. Two different approaches can help identify common ground:
**Language mapping**: mining social media and online publications to track trending terms and themes. Cisco, for example, used this technique to identify priorities of various stakeholders and topics that might appeal to them. Cisco marketers saw the opportunity to craft a range of experimental messages and embed them in social media to track adaptation of the language in online conversations among different stakeholder groups. This way they were able to help create a common language and shared perspectives among shareholders.

**Shared learning**: a technique used to expose common priorities when stakeholders believe their interests are mutually exclusive and there is no common ground. In reality this is rarely. For example, Kimberly-Clark Professional (KCP) sells health and safety products and provides shared learning through facilities assessments or site surveys. They offer learning tools with accompanying materials that promise guidance and they highlight the shareholders’ shared needs. Another example of shared learning is found in Greif, a global industrial packaging manufacturer, which reasoned that connecting offerings with the customers’ sustainability goals could elevate the purchasing decision to a strategic level. Greif developed the Green Tool, a diagnostic tool that potential customers can use to evaluate the environmental benefits of various operational changes. To use this diagnostic tool the participation of multiple stakeholders is required, which helps decision makers with different goals to discover their areas of alignment.

**STRATEGY 2: MOTIVATING MOBILIZERS**

Mobilizer Value = Rewards - Risks

The value for a mobilizer to advocate will increase either when the perceived risk is reduced or when the perceived rewards are increased.

**Reduce perceived risk**: reduce the fear of mobilizers to hurt their credibility or job security by lobbying for a specific solution. Willingness to advocate for a purchase increases when perceived organizational support for a supplier increases. Advocates are often unaware of allies within their organization, the challenge for suppliers is to reveal this support. This can be done by shared learning, but focused approaches that target individual advocates and encourage them to speak up are more efficient and critical for participation. For example Holcim, a global supplier of cement, conducts surveys throughout its customers’ organizations to collect net promoter scores (NPS), which measure the willingness to recommend a product or a company. This NPS data can demonstrate the broad support when an account manager encounters a potential advocate for a new offering at an existing customer.

**Increase perceived rewards**: Instead of only conveying the business value of an offering which is a commonly employed technique in the B2B world, combining perceived value with an emotional tie can make the difference in motivating a mobilizer. Grainger, a global provider of ‘maintenance, repair and operations’ solutions, for example, found through market research that his customers valued their managing capability to keep their plants running safely and efficiently. Grainger designed a campaign to demonstrate a direct link between Grainger’s unique capabilities and managers’ desire to run facilities at peak performance. Facility managers stated that Grainger “gets them” better than competitors do which led to more motivation to advocate for Grainger products.
**Strategy 3: Equipping Mobilizers to be Effective.**

80% of the surveyed mobilizers wanted support from suppliers in communicating the value of solutions. Increasingly this supporting role will have to be provided by marketing, because the challenges of achieving consensus often emerge before the sales team enters the scene. Progressive marketing teams are converting sales enablement materials to support mobilizers and they provide these materials for free. Important aspects when converting sales tools into mobilizer tools are: to make the content supplier neutral, to make sure mobilizers’ efforts are minimized and to address knowledge or skill gaps. For example Marketo, a provider of marketing automation software, created a 100-page mobilizer tool kit with detailed guidance on how to communicate the value of the offering to diverse stakeholders and specifics they need to make their business case internally. The tool kit offers mobilizers tips on the art of persuasion and guides them through the purchase process. Such a guide can be useful to set expectations with customers, help guide the purchasing decision and influence requests for proposals.

**Conclusion**

Innovative suppliers:
- prime groups with a common language and shared perspectives
- motivate internal mobilizers to advocate their firms’ solutions
- equip those mobilizers to help groups reach consensus

Accomplishing this requires a focus on connection of decision makers within a customer’s organization with one another, instead of a focus on individual connection with the supplier. Because of today’s pressure to drive consensus, the relationship between sales and marketing will also have to change. Suppliers will have to align sales and marketing as a single team with a common goal to remain competitive.