



# Customer Controlled Selling

Today's savvy buyers are armed to the teeth with information. In the first of two articles, **DAVID BATUP** shows how online tools have changed the way your customers buy – and how they should change the way you sell

**T**here is a shift in the buying process that is causing vendors to rethink the way their sales teams engage with prospects and customers. The cause is the change in buyer behaviour, expectations and their approach to procurement. Canny buyers today are better informed and better equipped, with comparisons and feedback about your products and services, to the point where they are likely to be ahead of your sales and marketing team in every respect. By the time they choose to engage with you, you are probably already on their initial shortlist.

Depending on the quality of the conversations that follow, they will decide fairly quickly whether you are someone in which it is worth investing any more of their valuable time. They have been able to get to this point because of the explosion in online resources, access to subject experts from around the world and candid feedback from your customers. It is quite likely that they have found information useful to their selection process that is unknown to your sales executive when he or she meets with them. Just to keep up, your sales executives need to be equally prepared and ready to have conversations that add value to the buyer's decision-making process. It's important to understand where the buyer is in the process and that they are well-informed.

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## BE AS TRANSPARENT AS POSSIBLE

We are moving towards the point of rethinking the stages in sales methodologies, realising that the sales process now starts not with a lead, but much earlier. It has moved into the area traditionally owned and looked after by marketing. Buyers now expect to find information about you, your products and customer feedback as part of their initial research of the market. Given their time pressure, if this information is not available, or it's difficult to find, or it's not complete and transparent, then it will all count against you.

The use of social media in the early stages of the buying cycle has been researched by Connected Marketer and DemandGen. Their report, *Inside the Mind of the New B2B Buyer* found that of buyers surveyed:

- 78% started with informal information gathering
- 59% engaged with peers who addressed the same challenge
- 48% followed industry conversations on the topic
- 44% conducted anonymous research of a select group of vendors
- 41% followed discussions to learn more about the topic
- 37% posted questions on social networking sites looking for suggestions/feedback
- More than 20% connected directly with potential solution providers via social networking channels. ➤

◀ **THE NEW AGE ANALYST**

The following scenario shows exactly how the buying process has changed.

Adam, an IT business analyst has been tasked to select, shortlist and recommend a CRM system for his company. The company is an SMB and has a considerable number of contacts and customers. He has a checklist of what is required and a budget figure based on the business case that has been developed. The preference is for a fully hosted CRM system that will integrate with the company's call management application.

Adam spends a day on his task, and comes up with a shortlist of three web-hosted CRM solutions, complete with actual customer comments and recommendations (some of which need checking out with the vendor). His first pass includes the level of fit against his checklist of requirements. He forwards the findings on to the other decision-makers, and suggests a 30-minute briefing.

In contrast to the traditional method of procurement, Adam is several steps into a new 'social-networking-enabled' buying cycle. He has eliminated the majority of the CRM vendors and is down to three. He also has some valuable insights from their customers and has been able to understand how their solutions would fit.

Unfortunately for those vendors who have been eliminated from Adam's research, they will never know why. That is unless they are listening in to the chatter on the social networks, such as LinkedIn.

The first step in addressing this problem is to understand buyers like Adam and their approach to using all the online tools and social networks available to them. How did he reach a shortlist of three and what will be the impact on the sales executives that Adam contacts from the three companies that have been shortlisted?

At the start of his day, having established the company's CRM system requirements, Adam visits several CRM sites such as GoodCRM to compile a list of

CRM vendors that meet the high level criteria. He then posts a question on three LinkedIn groups (these would be sales- and CRM-focused, reaching around 30,000 members) and submits a LinkedIn comment asking for advice and guidance on what people would recommend. From the candid responses, he starts to trim his list down to five.

He gathers more 'what are they like to work with' information by quizzing his contacts on Twitter. He also follows some of the industry watchers and analysts such as CRM, GoodCRM, CRMStrategies, DestinationCRM and CRMOutsiders. This helps bring his list down to four.

Adam visits the four

companies' websites. He uses the associated blogs and signs up for the trials available, deciding not to proceed in one case. Adam now has three strong candidates he believes can do the job and a list of questions for them to answer. He will assume that the sales executives he meets are equally well-prepared and briefed in terms of his company, and the market in which they operate, and that they will have researched him personally. Anyone who hasn't done their homework is, in Adam's mind, not taking the opportunity seriously and, worse, is showing a lack of respect.

What is interesting about this approach is the number of buying decisions that have already been made online. Previously, the sales executive would have provided much of the information to support the buying cycle that is now available as online information, with content as the conduit. As Douglas Karr, founder of *Marketing Tech Blog*, puts it, "In the past, your salesperson was the

conduit between the prospect and the sale. Now, information that's available online is the conduit. If your company wants to be present when people are at the critical step in the decision-making process, your salespeople must be online where those decisions are happening."

From the perspective of the sales executives from the three CRM vendors, the first meeting and the

way ahead is full of pitfalls. Unless they have found out how far down the track Adam is, they could run the risk of alienating him through their approach and style. In this situation a good sales executive will recognise that Adam needs answers first and that there will be time to explore other aspects of the sale later.

**THE CHANGING FACE OF THE SALES EXECUTIVE**

Previously, the vendor's sales executive would research the prospect as much as they could - now they need to ensure they are as up-to-date as the prospect, in terms of their own solution, what people are saying about it on the social networks, and checking their own online presence. In other words, they need to have a decent profile on LinkedIn or have gained expert status by being active on relevant LinkedIn groups and Twitter.

If you assume that buyers nowadays like to check out who they are meeting and how it is they might be able to help, you can see how the profile of a sales executive needs to change, perhaps becoming more aligned with a consultant or subject expert.

The availability of information, the transparency of opinion and the unprecedented level of help that unknown professionals and experts worldwide are prepared to give, are changing the whole buying/selling process in a fundamental way. If you are in sales what does this mean to you and the team? The next edition of *Winning Edge* will provide some pointers for you, using the familiar construct of People, Process and Technology.

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