

Advanced knowledge for senior marketers

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Bridging the void: a sales perspective on working with marketing

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Introduction

Achieving the marketing plan relies heavily on the sales function, but the relationship between sales and marketing can often be strained. Ian Speakman, Associate Professor and head of the International Negotiation and Sales Management track at IÉSEG School of Management, summarises part of his research into intra-organisational conflict and describes what the sales function really thinks about the marketing department, arguing that both sales and marketing need to work more closely together in order to fully understand the practical challenges facing the organisation in meeting their customers' needs.

The Great Divide

The salesperson's role within the organisation requires them to represent their customer's needs internally, acting as the 'customer advocate,' frequently negotiating for a wide variety of resources and services using diverse interpersonal interactions and social business networks (the internal sales job). In many cases, the salesperson is part of a large, customer-focused team and so may encounter a wide range of intra-organisational, interpersonal conflicts. Most frequently, from the sales perspective, the source of this departmental conflict is marketing.

Departmental conflict within the organisation arises when salespeople and marketers perceive differences in beliefs, values or goals which impact on their ability to work together and impedes their performance. In my research, two thirds of the salespeople describe more than half of such conflicts as coming from marketing. The main reasons they gave were a lack of support in trying to achieve their sales objectives, which they perceived to be misunderstanding as a result of poor communication and insufficient resources, both causing a high level of frustration within the sales force.

In other words, the salesperson thinks the marketers do not listen to what they advocate when they are acting as the customer representative. Marketing just do what marketing want to do. As one salesperson put it,

"I frequently have big issues with the brand managers who don't truly understand how the customer operates..."

In addition to departmental conflict within the organisation, salespeople also perceive conflict related to seven specific situational sources of conflict: communication, people, resources, roles, goals, self-interest and culture.

With the exception of self-interest and culture, the marketing department comes top in creating these situational conflicts, adding further complexity to the relationship between sales and marketing. Salespeople perceive conflicts within the organisation as having multiple departmental and situational dimensions with miscommunication most frequently mentioned in relation to the marketing department. As another salesperson put it,

"Everyone has their say and Chinese whispers make everything much worse than it ever is and you have to deal with that all the time... it becomes challenging to manage the flow of communication when everyone's got a slightly different take, a slightly different objective, a slightly different view."

The relationship between sales and marketing is a close one, with missed priorities between customer and market orientation. Although often a balanced relationship, the frequency of conflicts encountered does have consequences.

Consequences of Sales and Marketing Conflict

The consequences for the salesperson working within the organisation, who works to meet both their customers' and organisation's needs, are significant. When considering their perception of the consequences of conflict, the overwhelming response from the participating salespeople was negative, expressing high levels of frustration, increased competitive and angry behaviour, and demotivation to the point of wanting to change organisation. Putting it simply, when the salesperson encounters difficult internal situations more frequently, the sales job externally become more difficult and stressful which has an impact on the internal selling role.

The overwhelming emotional response to conflict within the organisation was a feeling of frustration at having to deal with many issues, which the salesperson felt unnecessary, predominantly due to a lack of communication. This frustration increases competitive behaviour of the salesperson who has to aggressively pursue their goals predominantly with the marketing department; for example fighting to change marketer's brand plan which will not fit key customer strategy. Lack of or poor communication occurs particularly when the marketing strategy, brand and new product development strategy does not suit the sales strategy, or when the marketing department does not appear to be clear on what the customer strategy is –developing or changing products, resulting ultimately in a product which the customer will not buy. Moreover, research by Tellefsen and Eyuboglu, (2002) has shown that the customer has a perception of how well the salesperson acts as their advocate within the organisation. Therefore any conflicts, disputes or misunderstandings have to be managed in the best interests of the salesperson's organisation while also attempting to meet the customers' objectives, maintaining the external perception of customer orientation and prolonging mutually beneficial relationships.

However, all is not lost. Many salespeople describe dealing with internal conflict as a challenge, a process from which they develop new skills and learn how to manage similar issues again, illustrating that a certain amount of conflict can be a good thing. It stimulates creativity in some, leading to improved communications engaging with the marketing department and working towards their own organisational goals with customer-focused solutions.

Implications for Marketers

Whilst the objectives for sales people may not be totally in line with the marketing plan, significant differences in alignment between the sales and marketing functions may have detrimental consequences for the organisation, both in the ability of the company to achieve its immediate marketing objectives and, in the longer term, to successfully manage customer relationships.

Sales people are closest to the customer and are able to feedback on areas of the marketing plan which are not aligned to customer needs. It may not be practical or feasible to attain complete alignment between the two functions but, where there is misalignment, marketers must explain their reasoning to the sales team or risk creating a culture of mistrust between the two functions, resulting in conflict, demotivation of the sales force and customer rejection.

Further Reading

Speakman, J.I.F., and Ryals, L. (2012), "*Key account management: the inside selling job*", *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, 27 (5) pp. 360 – 369

Speakman, J.I.F., and Ryals L. (2010) "*A Re-evaluation of Conflict Theory for the Management of Multiple, Simultaneous Conflict Episodes*", *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, 21 (2), 186 - 201.

Tellefsen, T. and Eyuboglu, N. (2002). "*The Impact of a Salesperson's In-House Conflicts and Influence Attempts on Buyer Commitment.*" *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 22(3): 157.

About the Author



Ian is currently Associate Professor and head of the International Negotiation and Sales Management track at IÉSEG School of Management at the Catholic University of Lille, France (LEM, UMR, CNRS, 8179), where his primary research interests include negotiation, conflict and conflict management behaviour in the commercial context, particularly personal selling and key account management. Ian is also a visiting fellow at Cranfield University School of Management where he tutors on the Key Account Management Best Practice open programme and the full-time MBA programme, while participating in many bespoke company programmes.

Prior to joining IESEG, Ian worked for 16 years in sales and marketing across a wide range of markets, including; brewing, alcoholic beverages, toys, fresh and frozen foods and personal care products, with roles covering a number of sales and marketing positions, including; field sales management, brand management, key account management and direction.