The end of linear sales

By Gianni Anchois

In my book "Leader$hip, an insider guide" I discuss how to identify, and how to reach out to, your best potential customers. In this article, I focus on the changes required at process level to give yourself a better chance to succeed.

The linear sales process

Once upon a time, the sales steps used to be well identified sequential actions: build awareness, generate interest (consideration and hopefully preference), create a lead, develop it into an opportunity, apply the BANT criteria (budget, authority, need, timeline), pitch to client, get to close.

As the quintessential application of a simple linear process, it served its purpose for quite a long time. It was easy to use, simple to align resources along each step (marketing, pre-sale consultants, tech architects, sales execs), straightforward to monitor and measure the progress along the way.

It would build a so called sales funnel whereby the amount of leads entering the funnel would be reduced and filtered until only a few would have a good chance to get out of the funnel: in essence, to become won deals.

This sales process grew so popular because it provided the impression of having full control of the customer's environment. You moved your target clients along a continuum that went from prospecting to close and retention. Being a linear process, you could easily measure whether the customers took the next step or not: your funnel shape would tell you.

Conversion rates became the standard metric, and how to optimise them became the war cry for a few generation of marketers.

Unfortunately, conversion turned out to be way too much skewed toward the seller's perspective, and grew very detached from the evolving customer buying model.

The linear sales process and its funnel of opportunities break down in a hyper-connected, digitally engaged world, where customers are surrounded by information and have countless ways of learning about your products and services, completely outside of your sales process and out of your control.

The persuaders

So the game we are trying to play now has substantially changed. We do not call the shots anymore. Clients do not follow our sales process, they apply their own idiosyncratic purchasing model.

Somebody needs to reach out and persuade them to buy from us, through a non-linear process that couldn't be more different from what we've been using for so long.

Or is there a way to reconcile the two? After all, clients in your funnel have stated interest for your offerings, even though they might be sitting at very different stages along the continuum at any certain time.

This is where your persuasion strategy needs to kick in. In reality, customers usually start with either a problem, a need or a want.

Sometimes with a mix of the three. Deploy your listening antenna and attempt to proactively intercept those triggers - inside or outside of your sales process, say for example through digital social engagement, your website, etc.. Then you will be in a great position to start building your persuasion strategy.

Also keep in mind that while gathering information, clients are going to refine their buying criteria. Their final purchase decision will be affected by those changes. This is when your effort of influencing them with relevant, valuable information is most important. It will help them select what they perceive as the best options, and hopefully drive your client through the narrowest part of your sales funnel.

The new normal

Constant change has become the new normal for pretty much any business enterprise. At the end of the day, it's all about understanding, redesigning and implementing sound best practices to get closer to your clients.

Once you are confident that your strategy works, try to model it on both the process that you have in place: the good old sales funnel and the new purchase model adopted by your clients. If you build this bridge, you will have a stronger buy-in from your organisation and you will also avoid delays and potential de-focus. At the same time, you will understand your clients behaviour and be ready to make adjustments along their purchasing cycle.

Design an iterative process to build deeper, more detailed client scenarios accounting for the changes in the new engagement model and build layers of information to capture more nuanced details. Then all is left to do is to get your sales team excited and go win business!

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