

Business-to-business marketing strategies from the award-winning Ad Hoc Communication Resources team.

## The real divide isn't digital

Tech companies, in particular, often can't survive a short circuit between marketing and sales.

By Rebekah Donaldson

The regional technology firm wanted to double the size of its average deal within three years. But customers weren't going for it. They were haggling over prices and talking about regional and Bay Area competitors.

The firm's strategy was to stop pitching low markups on hardware and quick installations, and start emphasizing its consulting services.

Corporate forged a new marketing plan and marketing materials. But a disconnect between the marketing and sales teams prevented them from filtering down to the sales force in the field.

As a result, six months after the new plan went into play, the sales team still wasn't effectively selling the firm's services. The firm was burning through cash without generating enough revenue.

To be fair, sales was not equipped to sell the firm's entire solution. Marketing had produced new white papers and new client case studies, compiled kudos from a leading industry analyst, and created other useful materials. But because of the disconnect, few reps had access to the tools that would help them during the sales cycle.

At the same time, salespeople felt pressure to go for low-hanging fruit regardless of a deal's profit margin. They had to close deals, with each day's performance measured in hard dollars and cents.

The firm's marketers were focused on fostering trust in the new brand. To attract big-ticket customers, they felt they needed to be everywhere at once: building relationships not only with qualified prospects but with strategic partners, industry leaders, top reporters and investors.

So while company press releases said the firm was a new breed of service provider, sales was still talking up quick turnaround on hardware installation. When sales did try to sell services, they did not offer proof points.

The jarring divide between marketing and sales messaging confused key prospects, and they went elsewhere.

This real example isn't unique. It's the classic blunder for tech companies trying to grab market share: a divide between the sales staff and the marketing staff.

But tech companies, in particular, often can't survive a disconnect between marketing and sales. Executives responsible for purchasing technology products and services have learned that it's tough to make a good investment in complex technology, and tough to make it work. So they are highly skeptical about

claims like "seamless integration" and "increased productivity," they don't buy it.

When a firm leaves a buyer skeptical, competitors can step in.

The firm in the example had a truly good service offering. To get past buyers' skepticism and generate revenue, corporate had to make its marketing message an integral part of sales tools and practices.

Their starting point was one-on-one talks with the senior sales staff. Then marketers and salespeople collaborated to build guidelines for the sales process, checklists for discussions with prospects, and tips on assembling collateral for follow-up. Email attachments were designed to fit in with specific types of communication.

Marketing and sales also collaborated to write a new sales elevator statement and templates the sales teams could customize. The templates included content for slides, text for emails, text for sales letters, and a cold-call script.

A month later, the sales staff was using all of the marketing tools and sales templates in the field. They were selling the entire solution, getting less resistance on price, and hearing fewer references to the Bay Area and regional competition.

There have been added benefits. Because of the complexity of the company's offerings, it used to take an average of four weeks for new sales reps to start making coherent cold calls, and two months before they could deliver a compelling sales presentation. And even veteran reps took about one work-week to send follow up communications after a sales call or meeting.

Now a new sales rep can be phone-ready in three days, make cold calls after only a week, and lead a sales presentation after only two weeks. It takes only 10 minutes to generate professional, customized communications, whether it's a first contact or a follow-up.

At first, sales and marketing didn't mix well at this tech organization. But their paychecks are signed by the same company, so both teams had to work together.

For many other regional firms, it's time to bridge the traditional divide.

Rebekah Donaldson has been a member of the Ad Hoc team for five years. She writes about technology marketing for Ad Hoc clients and publications of the American Electronic Association (AeA), Bacon's, and American Marketing Association.



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