

PostScripts



Pulling Ahead of the Competition: Developing and Selling Your Competitive Advantage

By Fred Firestone

- ◆ Do you believe your company has a competitive advantage?
- ◆ Do your prospects perceive your company has a competitive advantage?
- ◆ Do you know that you're more right for your prospects than your sales numbers reflect?
- ◆ Do you find that all too often you're getting "spread sheeted" or hearing too many "let me think it over," when you know the best decision your prospects could make would be to buy your offerings?

Alka-Seltzer time?

If a business or organization continues to do what it has always done, it will get what it has always gotten. As demand for your offerings (products and services) increases, your numbers will grow as long as you continue to get your share of the market. If, however, demand shrinks, in order to grow you have to take somebody else's share. In a recent article about the INC. 500 (500 fastest growing companies in America), it was concluded that companies pull ahead of the competition by either further differentiating their products/services and/or further differentiating their selling system.

Step One - Differentiating Products/Services

The first step is to clearly establish compelling reasons why your offerings are more right for your prospects than the offerings of your competition. Whether one's business is accounting, gasoline, groceries, healthcare, software or mailing and fulfillment services, customers place value in two areas: They want you to be able to solve a problem they're experiencing and they place value in a customer experience that delivers on the EthicalFactor™ — Trust (genuineness), Credibility (believability) and Partnership (customer focus and accountability).

Differentiation will only occur if your prospects perceive they will be receiving a better solution to their problem and/or a more valuable customer experience than they would expect to

receive elsewhere. Quality is a function of expectation. The less expected, the greater the opportunity to stand out. And, the extent to which you're successful at differentiation turns on moments of truth and interactions your employees have with customers - not with what's in a mission statement or customer commitment policy.



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In today's market, with much quality "equality" of many products and services, it becomes increasingly more difficult to stand out with better solutions to customers' problems than they would expect to receive elsewhere. While there may be very little difference between your products or services and your competitors', there are innumerable ways of differentiating by giving your customers a more valuable customer experience than that expected from the competition.

A few years ago, we were doing a series of differentiation seminars for Shell dealers across the country. In Michigan a dealer approached me and explained how he was selling more full-service gasoline than anybody in town and that he was charging a higher price. I was intrigued and inquired how this was happening. He answered with an explanation of an occurrence that happened with regularity every Saturday: a car pulls into full service with kid in the back seat; attendant taps on the back window; kid brings the window down and is presented with a helium balloon, complete with the station's name. Needless to say, a happy kid begets a happy parent, which begets a fill up, drinks and repeat business.

Further, the dealer tells me that the following occurs on Saturday mornings in that Michigan town: kids get in the family car and state their requests for the day: "Let's go to the park; let's go to McDonalds; and, let's go to the Shell station." This Shell owner redefined who his customer was and differentiated the buying experience by conveying the EthicalFactor™ where

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customers didn't expect it. The fact that most customers saw going to the service station as a drudgery worked to his advantage. He transformed the customer mindset from "we've got to go to the Shell station" to "we get to go"! Did that dealer's gas work any better than anybody else's? Hardly.

Having had the opportunity to present and do a workshop at this year's Mid-Winter Executive Conference, I firmly believe the opportunity to differentiate your mailing and fulfillment service offerings is to deliver on the EthicalFactor™ better than your competition. If you look at where you've hit home runs for your customers, I'm fairly certain you excelled at delivering in the areas of Trust, Credibility and Partnership.

The pulling ahead plan then is to

- 1.) find ways of discerning what it will take to make your offerings more valuable to customers than what's being offered by the competition;
- 2.) package your offerings so that they include these competitive advantages, and then;
- 3.) effectively communicate to prospects the advantages of your offerings so that they purchase them.

Step Two - Differentiating the Selling System

Once this foundation of differentiation is established, you need to focus on a crucial moment of truth that greatly influences your service image: how you sell.

Just as you have to continuously improve the value of your products and services, your sales force has to continuously improve its effectiveness at working through the "buyer maze" that is conditioned to treat these products and services as com-

modities.

The question is how do you move your prospects from the point where they tell you, "we already have what you offer," or "just send me your literature," to the point where they are owners of the unique advantages you bring to the marketplace. (Nothing is more frustrating than being categorically dismissed as being the same as everyone else.)

The answer is not found in conventional sales training programs that seek to manipulate prospects into buying with gimmicks and multiple closes. These programs and their methods too often only serve to compromise the integrity companies have worked so hard to establish.

Sempact's NoHardSell™ Integrity Selling System, which we introduced to MFSA members in Maui, is about controlling the sales process by conveying more Credibility, Trust and Partnership than your competition. The System presupposes that there are no contradictions between doing what is best for you and doing what is best for your customer. There are no victims. It is not a conventional tactical approach in which salespeople are motivated or taught magic words that get people to buy.

Your goal should be to have your prospects self-discover:

- 1.) that you understand their product or service-related concerns better than anybody else in the industry, and
- 2.) that these concerns are best addressed by the unique solutions you bring to the market place (your differentiators).

If done properly, a "salesperson" becomes a "trusted consultant."

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