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The Right Tool at the Right Time
By Mary Sullivan

You've heard it before: The right tool makes the job go faster. Using the right tools is true for the sales cycle, too. When we talk about the sales cycle, we often represent its stages as horizontal layers in the sales funnel. And when we do that, we are almost always defining the sales cycle in the salesperson's terms.

Let's take a fresh look at your sales cycle. Rather than looking at it from ***your*** point of view, consider the sales cycle from the ***customer's*** point of view.

Customers go through their own steps in the purchase process, and to a large degree they map to your sales cycle. It is important to consider this because today, when a customer decides to buy something new, they begin exploring product options online. Their searches lead them to content on various vendors' websites, which may actually trigger their addition to various companies' sales funnels, and so *it is important to realize that the Web content that prospects find when they search is part of your sales toolbox*. We don't call it that, but that's the function it serves.

And when you think about the differences between the customer's cycle and yours, it is good to remember the two types of sales tools you use: external and internal. Traditionally, the salesperson presents **external** sales tools to a prospect, but these days, you also need to provide online content that helps customers navigate the early stages of their buying cycle. **Internal** tools provide valuable information that readies the salesperson to handle sales conversations.

Stages of the Cycle for Both You and Your Prospects

Customer's cycle	External Tools	Salesperson's cycle	Internal Tools
Recognition of Need	Searchable online content (White Papers, etc.)	Prospecting	Target customer profile (Personas)
Vendor Attention	Self-qualifier tools (online) Content downloads	Qualifying	Qualifying questions
Evaluation/ Comparison	Sales Presentation Demo	Developing	Objection handling guide Speaker notes in PPTs
Consideration	Competitive comparison Case studies References	Substantiating	Competitive guide
Decision	Proposal ROI calculator	Proposing	Proposal tool
Purchase	Sales agreement	Closing	

Pre-Engagement – Need-Recognition (Customer) and Prospecting (Sales)

- Customers – Marketing needs to produce Content that makes the case for your products and services and that makes them easily findable via search. Use blogs and social media to call attention to what you offer.
- Sales – Even before running a campaign or cold-calling, analyze where your best opportunities are. Your Marketing organization should develop Personas that profile the ideal customer.

Initial Engagement – Vendor Attention (Customer) and First Interview (Sales)

- Customers – Marketing can engage "pre-customers" with online tools. Ask qualifying questions and based on the answers direct the customer to choices which will best serve their needs. At this stage, potential customers may download White Papers or other relevant content to share with others in their decision process. Requiring registration to download content puts the prospect into your sales funnel, but make the description of it attractive in customer terms so registration doesn't scare them off.
- Sales – Arm sales development people with Qualifying questions to ask people who respond to your campaign. Determine if the prospect is a fit for your products and how soon they may be ready to make a purchase. Provide reps with more in-depth qualifying questions to learn about the prospect's buying process and the business problems you may be able to solve.

Information – Evaluating (Customer) and Presenting (Sales)

- Customers – When prospects are ready to speak with your reps, they have a definite interest and, almost certainly, questions. They will want to verify the benefits you offer and get a clear picture of how your product works. A *sales presentation* or a *demo*, or both, help answer questions and open a dialogue about other concerns they have. You can post *demo videos* on your website for prospects to view at any stage of their buying cycle.
- Sales – Your reps have done in-depth qualifying before heading into this phase, and they should already be familiar with how to handle possible objections. This is the stage at which customers may voice them. An *objection-handling guide* should be a main feature in your Sales Playbook. Make it easy for Sales to prepare for a *sales presentation* by including *speaker notes* in the PowerPoint. A demo script will also help sales people practice so they can perform the *demo* smoothly.

Moving Forward – Considering (Customer) and Substantiation (Sales)

- Customers – At this point customers want to clarify points and go over final considerations. They have undoubtedly spoken with competitors. Don't assume that the customer is clear on what advantages you have over your competition. Provide them with a well-developed *competitive comparison*, and if they are ready, *references.* Share *case studies* with the prospect now, if you haven't already.
- Sales – Reps should have access to a complete and current *competitive guide* with pros and cons of alternatives in the internal sales tools.

Wrapping It Up – Deciding (Customer) and Proposing (Sales)

- Customers – In big-ticket sales, and especially in this economy, the final decision may not just be from whom to buy, but may also be *whether* to buy. Seriously, it happens. A good way to tip the decision is to demonstrate a healthy Return on Investment (ROI). So when your rep presents a proposal, your *ROI Calculator* can move the customer forward with the decision to buy.
- Sales – Implement a *proposal tool* that makes it easy for your reps to prepare thorough and persuasive proposals with appropriate boilerplate to make the case.

The Finale – No tools required. Ask for their business. You just need the signatures on the *sales agreement*, and you have a deal.

Make It Happen

- ★ ***Keep all your tools in a "toolbox"*** – Store all your sales tools in one place. Be sure all sales people know how to use tools at each stage in the sale cycle, and make learning to use the toolset part of your sales training. Provide a special toolbox to your channel sales partners, being mindful that they may sell competing products.
- ★ ***Keep them current*** – Assign someone in Marketing and/or Sales Operations the responsibility of reviewing and refreshing sales tools, especially competitive information. Update both toolboxes when new products are introduced and when new Sales Playbooks are issued. Updates must include the online content, shaded in pink in the table above. Purge information that is out of date and not getting used. Determine why it isn't being used and what, if anything, would be a helpful replacement.
- ★ ***Keep them accessible*** – Store sales tools digitally in a searchable repository on your Intranet. Don't bury it. Make it easy to find. Communicate with the field on a regular basis about toolbox updates. The less you rely on print versions of sales tools, the less likely your reps will be working from old out-dated information.

Now is the time to refresh your toolbox and make sure it includes all the tools that will turn recognition of a need into a closed deal.

About the Author
Mary Sullivan, co-founder of KickStart Alliance, delivers customer-focused product marketing to clients in a variety of technology sectors, including clean tech. As a former salesperson and a current marketer, she knows how to make sales tools that work for customers as well as for sales. Mary is also a content strategist and understands how to draw the interest of new prospects. Want help with your sales toolbox? Contact Mary.

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