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Gartner Says Sales Organisations Must Upgrade Skills and Processes to Meet B2B Technology Buyer Expectations

Changes in Customer Engagement Force Rethinking of Go-To-Market and Sales Models
Gartner Special Report Examines the Future for IT Sales

STAMFORD, Conn., September 11, 2013 — Despite all the attention around digital marketing and its ability to connect with customers in new and meaningful ways, people selling to people is still the primary way in which business-to-business (B2B) technology purchases are made, according to a recent survey by Gartner, Inc.

Gartner conducted a primary research study across 503 organisations in North America, Europe and China to understand how the marketing activities of IT providers influence organisations' decisions to select certain technologies and services, as well as the providers that supply them. The survey found that 56 per cent of respondents considered direct interaction with the provider of high importance, 42 per cent of medium importance, while 3 per cent considered it of low importance.

"Personal interactions with providers are still the most influential activity in B2B buying decisions," said Tiffany Bova, vice president and distinguished analyst at Gartner. "However, buyers do not value their interactions with salespeople as much as they did in the past. As a result, sales teams must adjust processes and skills to learn to guide buyers through their purchase cycle."

During the past few years, the sales organisation has lost its control of the sales cycle.

"In the past, sales was dictating the flow of information — cold calling, sending out corporate marketing literature, meeting with prospective customers, conducting sales presentations and arranging high-level executive meetings in more of a push selling model," said Hank Barnes, research director at Gartner. "Now customers are deciding when and where the sales engagement will actually begin as well as how and where that interaction will take place in more of a pull model."

Gartner said that this change in customer engagement should result in providers looking closely at their go-to-market and sales models to ensure they are providing the necessary value in the buying process. Marketing and sales leaders need to understand the importance of continuing to invest in improving sales enablement, sales training and sales processes as buyers look to the quality of their direct interactions as a primary influence on their decisions during their technology buying cycles.

"Providers have been fairly consistent in how they train their sales force for decades," said Ms Bova. "However, these practices are now at odds with the way customers actually explore, evaluate, engage and experience a provider along their buying journey. The sales force of the future will need to intimately understand the customers' environment with a greater sense of the decision levers across IT and the business units. It will also need to translate technology into industry solutions and value propositions, and guide the customers to use cases they may not have considered. The sales force should therefore be viewed not as a source of technology products, but as a strategic partner helping the business evolve to meet their strategic objectives."

Gartner has identified four key changes the sales organisation should make to improve the customer's purchase experience:

Shadow Your Customers and Prospects Across Multiple Mediums

With widely available access to information and peers, the customer gains a tremendous power of choice. As a result, a variety of activities, used in combination, are required to address all of the buyers' questions and concerns, and lead to a purchase decision. As the Gartner survey revealed, buyers rated a variety of activities from direct interaction with the provider to social media as the most influential marketing activities. Gartner expects the multichannel approach to continue and sales teams need to be aware of all these activities.

Reorient Sales as a Knowledgeable Guide

Given the importance that buyers place on direct interaction, it is essential to understand who they want to interact with. The survey found that the most valued interactions are with technical and industry experts, not with sales staff. Although this may not be surprising, the gap between them is substantial. When exploring and evaluating options, 81 per cent of respondents most valued interaction is with a technical expert whereas only 38 per cent said their most valued interaction is with a member of the sales team. Similar results were recorded at other stages in the buying cycle.

Clearly, customers do not feel that their sales representatives are adding value to their buying process.

"To deliver what customers want, salespeople need to become more knowledgeable about what is happening in the customer buying process and offer insightful information that customers can't find on their own," said Mr Barnes. "The best sales reps will coordinate a range of activities and interactions to touch various members of the buying teams and guide the customer along their buying journey versus forcing them to follow the internally preferred process to address their questions and concerns."

Make Sales Presentations About the Customers and Their Needs, Not About You

Sales presentations rank fifth on the list of most influential marketing activities according to the survey. Gartner research shows that sales presentations have the biggest impact when buyers are focused on evaluating and engaging, or when buyers are looking to deepen engagement and experience. Typically, buyers want to hear more detail from providers after they have done their own initial information gathering. This means that in the future, sales presentations should not be used as the primary tool by sales to educate the buyer, but rather as way to develop a custom interaction above and beyond what they can find on their own. This can become a competitive weapon as sales organisations look to separate themselves from the competition. If they take the extra time to really home in on the uniqueness of each opportunity, there is tremendous value that can be added to the buying cycle — especially in the eyes of the customer.

Plan for Change

To address the increased expectations of today's buyer, sales needs to lead change efforts in their organisations, in partnership with marketing, and in the way they sell.

"Sales matters as much now as it always has; however, it appears to have lost some of its customer influence," said Ms Bova. "Creating a strong sales team that can orchestrate technical and industry resources is critical. These teams need to develop methods, both by questioning and through the use of technology, to understand the work buyers have done on their own and add value to that work to guide them toward a successful purchase. Sales teams that do this will help themselves and the providers they work for stand apart from their competition."

More detailed analysis is available in the reports "Tech Go-to-Market: Sales Organizations Need to Upgrade Skills and Processes to Meet Buyer Expectations" and "Tech Go-to-Market: The B2B Customer Buying Cycle for Technology Products and Services." The reports are available on Gartner's web site at <http://www.gartner.com/resId=2583516> and <http://www.gartner.com/resId=2521216>.

Additional information is available in the Gartner Special Report "The Future of IT Sales." This special report provides tools and best practices for making go-to-market choices a source of differentiation and competitive advantage, instead of an afterthought. The special report can be viewed at <http://www.gartner.com/technology/research/future-of-it-sales/> and includes links to reports and video commentary that examine the future of IT sales and factors driving this evolution.

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