

Sales Management and Social Media

In technology what can happen will happen. The World Wide Web and social media began as novelties, but soon became necessities. In the process B2B and B2C transactions became more transparent and more power was shifted to the buyers. However, social media has transferred some of the power back to the sales people and to sales management. How can we use social media to improve sales force productivity and assist sales force management?

First of all, for years sales and marketing managers trained sales people to obtain customer and competitor information from annual reports, press releases, web sites, in person probing questions, trade shows and trade literature. Recently we have been training sales people to use search engines such as Google to collect both customer and competitor information. Of course the marketing department should be assisting sales people in collecting and sharing this information. Marketing department share sites are particularly helpful for collecting and communicating competitor and customer information.

Today sales managers should train sales people to not only use search engines and customer web sites, but Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter to obtain important information on customers and the people who make or influence customer purchasing decisions. Today sales people should seldom have to make a cold call.

Comprehensive customer knowledge gives sales people a competitive advantage. Sales managers have always asked sales people to keep profiles on customers/ prospects and the people who influence and make the buying decisions. On these customer profiles we ask sales people to record who are their customer/prospect's customers, who are their competitors in each end market, plus what are their customer's needs, problems and hot buttons? Also for each customer, we ask the sales person to note what is the decision making process, what are the steps for each customer and vendor from search to purchase? In addition, we ask what are the backgrounds, needs and career goals of the people making and influencing the buying decisions? Whether your firm sells to customers involved in a long complex strategic decision making process with many steps between search and purchase or a shorter more tactical process this information is critical for success.

Comprehensive competitor knowledge allows sales people to target customers, sell value and make price less important. Using a competitive grid for each product/service or market, we ask sales people to note who are our competitors, what are the competitive issues, how does our firm compare, how does the customer choose between vendors? In the past we have ask sales people with help from marketing to obtain this information from customers, annual reports, networking, web sites, trade shows, trade literature and web sites.

As mentioned above, sales people should also be trained to use Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter to obtain this customer/prospect and competitor information along with the information on customer decision makers and influencers. For example, by typing in "hash tags" on Twitter with the name of a customer or competitor or specific products/services, a sales person can read discussions, comments and criticisms on these subjects from end users or distributors. Such information can identify problems and needs your customers and competitors might not even be aware of. Training sales people to obtain and use this knowledge represents a powerful tool.

Of course the sales person or the marketing department should also be looking at any official customer and competitor sites on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to obtain additional knowledge. For the last five

years B2C businesses have used social media to promote/advertise their products/services. Now I am recommending that B2B firms use social media to obtain important customer and competitor knowledge.

As I mentioned previously sales people should seldom need to make a cold call. Before calling on a prospect, the sales person should look the contact person up on Facebook and LinkedIn. Do they have common friends, interests, experiences, backgrounds? Knowledge is power. What are the contact person's career goals and work experience? With this corporate and personal information, a sales person can formulate more focused and appropriate probing questions and should find it easier to obtain an initial appointment. With this information a sales person will gain more control over the sales process and become more confident.

In addition to all this, B2B firms should have their IT and marketing departments track who visits their web site, how many times they visit and what they look at. These analytics can then provide qualified leads for sales people.

Secondly, social media can also assist sales managers in hiring better candidates. In addition to interviews, reference checking and other screening techniques, the sales manager should look at the candidate's Facebook and LinkedIn pages. This should help the manager focus interview and reference checking questions. For those candidates who are on Facebook or LinkedIn, the sales manager will obtain valuable information on hobbies, interests, job history, career goals and accomplishments.

Third, social media can also help in sourcing candidates. In addition to sourcing sales people through recruiters, networking, on line hiring sites, competitors, customers and current employees, do a search on LinkedIn. By typing in your industry or product/service on the home page, you can get the names and contact information of subscribers with those words in their profiles. For an extra charge you can do a search by skills. The choice of key words that you search by is very important and LinkedIn can help with this. There is also a small army of consultants who give seminars on how to use social media to hire candidates and to sell customers/prospects.

Try these ideas on using social media to make your sales force more productive and to make sales management more effective. Soon you will have acquired a lot of expertise and many new techniques.

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