

## Teach Your Agents to Become Navigators

**E**veryone knows that the Internet has changed our daily lives. But did you know that the Internet also has changed the world of sales forever? If you understand this, you have already made changes in the way you and your agents sell. But if this is news to you, then you may be operating with systems and beliefs that are no longer effective with current prospects and clients.

Before the rise of the Internet in 1995, the majority of buyers were Delegators. In terms of their advice-seeking behavior, 59% of all buyers delegated their decisions to trusted advisors, such as real estate agents. They were fully dependent on sales associates to provide three things: (1) information about homes, (2) a way to obtain homes, and (3) advice about homes.

Less than two years later, in 1997, only 21% of consumers were Delegators. What happened? The Internet gave birth to two new kinds of consumers: The Opinion Seeker and the Self-Directed Buyer. By 1997, 50% of all consumers were comfortable using search engines to find information about products and services. Another 29% discovered that they could obtain the product or service

*Consumers have become very skilled at collecting oceans of information about home buying and selling. What they need now is someone to help them navigate the waters. —By Linda H. Stimac*

directly. These Self-Directed Buyers are a familiar sight today. They buy and sell their own homes; they buy stocks without a financial advisor; and they book their own travel.

Sales professionals know that the Self-Directed Buyer has changed the sales world forever. However, sales professionals are not usually aware of the dramatic impact that The Opinion Seeker has also had on the way they sell and on their results. The advice-seeking behavior of consumers in 2005 has not changed much since 1997—53% are Opinion Seekers.

Opinion Seekers wreak havoc in the sales profession because they desire information. If you are the last sales professional that they happen to seek out, then they may buy from you. But what if you are not the last one, and instead, one of two or three or four in the middle? Then, sadly, your fate is to become an unpaid consultant—giving information to the Seeker and not getting paid for it.

After awhile however, Opinion Seekers, run into a problem called Information Overload. They consult Google and Jeeves; they visit Web sites; they read newspaper and magazine articles; and they talk with friends, other advisors, and significant others. Soon they are “drinking from a fire hose” of information and become paralyzed with indecision. There is just too much information out there.

A key to the new world of sales is the knowledge that consumers want someone to help them navigate through the avalanche of information. What they crave most is someone to help them make a decision.

This means that the role of the sales professional has to change. Sales professionals can no longer function as Intermediaries, occupying the position between the buyer and the product or service that the buyer desires. The sales professional used to be the single source of product information, the means to acquire the product or service, and advice. But now only one role remains.

Today the sales professional is a navigator. It is a wonderful role to have, but only if you know how to be a navigator or facilitator as opposed to a salesperson. Advisors help prospective clients make decisions amidst an avalanche of information. They help clients navigate their way to a decision.

Companies in all industries are making the transition from transactional to consultative selling. While they don't always know that it is the Opinion Seekers who have made the transition necessary, sales leaders do recognize the negative effect the Seekers have had on sales results and customer retention. They've watched their sales teams waste time with prospects who are “just seeking information, thank you.”

But before you dust off an old copy of a sales book or call your local sales trainer, it is important to recognize something else that will never be the same: the way sales professionals learn.

We now know that in order to execute, sales professionals must first have an opportunity to identify the ingrained myths they have about selling. For example, they may believe that it takes a long time to close a sale

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in their business. Like a myth, there can be a kernel of truth in the belief. In life insurance, the underwriting process can be very lengthy. Nevertheless, there is a negative outcome for the sales professional that holds this belief. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If one believes that it takes a long time to close a sale, then it will take a long time.

Myths are often the source of skill gaps. For example, if sales professionals believe that it is not right to ask for introductions, then they will not ask for introductions. The skill goes undeveloped, and it is a critical skill. Myths and skill gaps are the reason that most sales systems don't work. Work first to strengthen beliefs and remove conditions that interfere with highly developed skills. Then, sales professionals will execute the sales process with consistent precision.

As for the right consultative selling system, not just any system will work. Most sales training programs do not address the way consumers buy - that is, what is the emotional decision-making process that prospects and clients employ to make a buying decision? The sales professional who understands how the client thinks becomes an expert navigator.

Sales professionals learn best through blended learning. According to Barbara Lyman, author of *Blended Learning: An Ongoing Process for Internet Integration*, "The most common theme in adult learning theory is

that, in order to be effective, teaching must be learner-centered and self-directed."

When salespeople are motivated, they want to be self-directed. If they want to learn, they wish to obtain some of that knowledge on their own. A Web-based learning program that can hold attention and encourage participation is the answer.

Effective learning is also learner-centered, meaning that there must be a time and place to apply the concepts of self-directed study to the real world of the salesperson. This is best done in a group setting, where colleagues learn together and share ideas about current sales in progress.

So, as you can see, learning, like selling, will never be the same. The rise of the Internet means that more companies are discovering how to make blended learning work for them. In a Sales and Marketing Management study of 272 companies in 2003, 42% have been using e-learning for "quite some time," and 29% were using e-learning with their sales force. That study is more than a year old, and the percent of companies who want to employ blended learning techniques is increasing steadily, especially in the United States.

In a world where the consumer has changed dramatically—and changed forever—the most important thing that sales professionals can do is to change the way they sell. When they do, they become highly skilled facilitators of decision making. The reward is that their clients appreciate the experience and make more high quality introductions. For a company, the ultimate rewards are that sales professionals achieve their full potential as advisors, sales production is more consistent, and client retention increases. ■

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