

Sales and Service: Time for a Merger

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Professional courtesy, that's what I call it. It's the punch line to the question, "Why don't sharks eat lawyers?"

It's also my reason for not criticizing other analysts in public. Besides, there's too much to write about to bother picking a public fight. If someone wants to promote a flat-earth theory, I say let them.

Sooner or later the marketplace figures it out and the idea dies.

Why am I telling you this? It's because I am about to break my own rule, sort of. Call it another milestone in the decline of civility. At least I won't name names.

Irreconcilable Differences?

The issue is transforming the call and contact center into a service center that reliably generates revenue. At least one recent analyst report says it can't be done. But the executive suite is demanding more revenue from all sources these days, and the service center is being tapped for its share. Immovable object? Irresistible force? Something has to give.

The report I have in mind was based on a survey of call-center executives. It asked a lot of questions about the status quo and what these managers are going to do to improve it. I didn't see a lot of out-of-the-box thinking there, just some attempts at improvements around the margin. The upshot was this: The missions of the sales and support organizations are so different that they can't be reconciled, and the people in service/support/call centers are not capable of being trained to sell. Basically, the report claimed that the best you can hope for in a service center is to use technology and training to enhance customer loyalty. Leave the selling to someone else.

To me, that sounds like the old saying, "If God wanted you to fly, he'd have given you wings." It hasn't been done, therefore it can't be done.

Well, all right, I can't fly, but we all have this nifty organic-electro-chemical computer situated between our ears that, given time and resources, helps us make up for such deficiencies. Just ask Wilbur and Orville.

Shifting Paradigms

I completely agree that, as constituted right now, the vendor-customer relationship will not be easily manipulated into revenue generation from service calls. But it must. So how do we get there?

Essentially, the support situation we face today is not that much different from the quality challenge we faced about 30 years ago. You might not be old enough to remember this, but once there were a lot of manufactured products that were pretty terrible. I am not talking about things you throw away when they break. I'm talking about cars and refrigerators, things you expect to work well throughout the installment payment period and beyond.

At the peak of the crisis, corporations made the responses you might expect from organizations that thought nothing fundamental was wrong. They tinkered around the edges. They appointed task forces, emphasized the idea of quality control, created quality departments, and made quality — in the form of inspections — the last step in the manufacturing process. It worked, sort of. Defective products were caught and prevented from reaching the market until they could be fixed. This led to massive rework that no one could afford. Finally, someone's organic-electro-chemical computer kicked in and figured out that quality had to be built in, not added at the end of the process. Ac-

tually, they probably all just read W. Edwards Demming, but no matter. A paradigm shift later, the problem was solved.

Just take a look at all the high-quality products on store shelves today. Think for a moment about where many of these products are made. Emerging economies have a lot of unskilled workers who are not especially well schooled in quality manufacturing theory. The high-quality products on the shelves today are the result of high-quality processes that were instituted in a paradigm shift.



Deep Support

So what does this have to do with selling in the service center? Everything. A couple of years ago, Harvard Business School professor Shoshana Zuboff wrote a book titled *The Support Economy*, and it is the best resource I have seen on the subject. As long as we think about the sale as discrete from service, Zuboff argues, we will always face the question of how to engage the customer to make the next purchase. We ought to be building service into the relationship, not adding it on.

Bringing the two together is what should constitute the vendor-customer relationship (don't they have software for that?), and it is what Zuboff calls "deep support." That's the new paradigm we need to shift toward. The highest form of service is found in knowing your customers so well that you can anticipate their needs and be ready with proactive solutions.

Deep support is not free. It has to be paid for out of the margin a vendor gets for the product, or it needs to be provided under a separate agreement. Done right, the process of creating a service center that can reliably generate revenue is a no-brainer. It is an act of faith in the customer and a demonstration of commitment to building long-term relationships.

Of course it can be done.

About the Author



Denis Pombriant

Denis Pombriant is a well known thought leader in CRM and he is the founder and managing principal of the Beagle Research Group, a CRM market research firm and consultancy. In 2003, CRM Magazine named Pombriant one of the most influential executives in the CRM industry. Pombriant's latest white paper, "The New Garage" discusses the emerging new enterprise software industry business model.

E-mail: denis.pombriant@beagleresearch.com

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Contact Us

Beagle Research Group
264 Greenbrook Drive
Stoughton, MA 02072
781-297-0066
information@beagleresearch.com