Marketing Messenger

18 exclusive insights from CMO.com that every marketer should know
Dear Readers,

CMO.com is an online publication dedicated to delivering marketing insights, expertise, and inspiration for and by marketing leaders – all aimed at helping CMOs and senior marketers lead their brands in the new digital world.

Since 2012, we have been featuring Tim Riesterer, Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer for Corporate Visions, Inc., on CMO.com as an ongoing contributing thought leader. With more than 20 years of executive experience in the marketing and sales arena, Tim’s columns offer readers best practices for sales and marketing management; tools for effective messaging and communication development and deployment; and tips on how to build and lead an efficient and productive sales team.

Marketing Messenger is a compilation of 18 CMO.com exclusive insights authored by Tim. This collection is a go-to resource for marketing and sales leaders. Read on to learn more about Tim’s exclusive insights that every marketer should know.

Regards,

Tim Moran

Editor in Chief, CMO.com
Messaging Development

Are you passionate about your solution's superiority? So is your competition. Too many marketers make the critical mistake of focusing their message on “Why You” – what your company does, your fantastic features, and why you’re different and better than the competition. Here’s the problem: your prospects are still trying to figure out why they should even change from their status quo. Check out these articles to learn how to develop compelling and provocative “Why Change” messages that challenge your prospects’ status quo and get them to consider doing something different.

Articles:
- Do You Want to Be a Malcolm or Morton? 3 Tips for Creating Million-Dollar Messaging
- We Need to Talk – Your Persona Is Lying
- Don’t Let Your Marketing Messages Swing and Miss
- Your Buyers Are Saying One Thing and Doing Another
- Problem Finding vs. Problem Solving: Your Messaging Needs to Get in Front of Your Customers
- Create Insight Without Merely Delivering Factoids
INTRODUCTION

Are you familiar with the concept of “the tipping point”? If so, who do you think coined the concept?

a) Benjamin Franklin
b) Morton Grodzins
c) Malcolm Gladwell

If you said C, then you’d be incorrect. Gladwell is the author of the best-selling novel *The Tipping Point*, which explores this concept, but the first person to develop the idea – according to written record – is Morton Grodzins, an unknown political science professor. Grodzins developed this concept more than 40 years before Gladwell even published his book.

You might be wondering to yourself, *How did Gladwell make millions of dollars from this concept, while Grodzins remains unknown?* The answer is simple: Gladwell messaged it best. He understood how to take very technical and academic concepts and put them in terms that everyone could appreciate.

So what can you, as a marketer, learn from Gladwell? Messaging that makes concepts relatable for the masses will help you rise above your competition and appeal directly, unchallenged, to your prospects and customers.

Once you have determined your company’s distinct strengths – buried in your company are ideas, offerings, concepts, and capabilities that are of great value to your customers, but need to be messaged properly – follow these three tips to create your own million-dollar messaging:

1. **Live in your customers’ world:**
The single greatest differentiator between a successful company and an unsuccessful one is the story it tells during the buying cycle. All too often, when talking with customers, you want to dive in and tell them why your

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3 Key Tips

**Live in your customers’ world**

- **Avoid content overload**: To help your customers make a decision, you need to do more than overload them with data sheets and other information. Create distinct and engaging content that appeals to the decision-making part of the brain to help move customers off of the status quo. Your story must show them the impact that current trends, issues, challenges, and changes will have on their businesses and desired outcomes. It also needs to illustrate how you can help them avoid the risks and make the most of their opportunities.

  - Look at Gladwell: He didn’t just report on Grodzins’ discovery. No, he looked at the tipping point from every angle, and then made it relatable to you and me. He took an esoteric concept and made it pragmatic and applicable for our lives – and that’s precisely why he was so successful.

  - **3. Aim at the right target**: Your fiercest competitor isn’t another company – it’s the status quo. So as you’re building your messaging content, keep in mind that it needs to defeat these root causes of the status-quo barrier:

    - **Attention economy**: As they say, time is money. Today, time is more valuable than ever, and getting people’s attention can sometimes be near impossible. When you do get face time with a customer, you can’t afford to be timid or to play the 20-questions game.

    - **Change burden**: How much do customers hate change? So much that they’re often willing to live with their less-than-ideal solutions because they see the pain of changing as being worse. To break through the status-quo barrier, you’ll need to show how the pain of not changing is worse than the pain of doing things differently.

    - **Risk aversion**: It’s a fact that people respond better and faster to threats than to the potential for gain. This is why your stories about your solution’s features/benefits and your ROI calculations fail to break through the status-quo barrier. Instead, show your customers where their current solution is leading them: down the wrong path. They must see their status quo as “unsafe” before they will move away from it.

    - **Entrenched competition**: Sure, incumbency has its advantages. Established solutions are safe and comfortable. But you can uproot them if your messaging clearly shows the contrast between your approach and the status quo.

At the end of the day, the difference between the best messaging and ho-hum messaging is the difference between making millions of dollars and toiling in obscurity, as evidenced by Malcolm Gladwell and Morton Grodzins. So before you create your next campaign, or before you create another piece of content, ask yourself this:

*Do you want to be a Malcolm or a Morton?*
We Need to Talk – Your Persona Is Lying

For years marketers have created personas – fictional characters that embody all the traits of their prospects. They have names, beliefs, demographic attributes, and behaviors that help create relevant marketing messages. But do prospects actually respond better to a message because it was based on a persona? Is the persona driving prospects’ responses to the message?

The reality is, no. Your persona has been lying to you; prospects don’t make purchase decisions and change their current approach – or status quo – because of who they are and their characteristics. Instead, prospects respond to messages if they perceive their status quo to be in danger, or if they’re convinced that they must do something different to preserve their best interest. As a result, basing marketing messages off of a persona is ineffective and completely derailing your marketing messaging.

Know Thy Prospect
To ensure your messages are on-point, I recommend using a “status-quo profile” as the starting point. By leveraging this technique, you’ll identify your prospect’s status quo – learn it inside and out – and use this knowledge to create effective messaging that moves your prospect to make a change. However, to do so, be sure you know the answers to the following questions:

1. Currently, how are your prospects addressing the challenges that your product/service can resolve?

Your prospects believe they are already doing something to solve their problems and meet their business goals. If they didn’t, they’d be beating down your door asking for your solution.

To dislodge your prospects from their status quo, change their perception and help them realize your solution can resolve existing issues – perhaps even some they aren’t aware they have. To do so, you need an exact understanding of your prospect’s current solution and its capabilities.

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Why do your prospects believe their current approach is the Holy Grail?

Don’t forget, prospects live in their world – not yours – and before they deployed their current solution, they probably had another solution. So it’s rational to assume they believe they’re already doing something “better” and don’t have a problem or need to change. Keep this in mind as you develop your messages – don’t focus on your solution’s specs and features. Instead, focus on how your solution can help them in ways their current solution cannot.

Since your prospects implemented their current approach, what challenges, threats, or missed opportunities have come to light?

As you develop your marketing messages, remember that not everyone will be an appropriate prospect for your solution. Focus on the best opportunities for change. To identify these opportunities, keep tabs on the changes in your prospect’s industry – from environmental changes to competitors to the global marketplace. Any factor or situation that your prospect’s current approach is unprepared to handle, or that your prospect may not have considered, will be essential to weave into your messaging.

What are the holes in your prospects’ current approach?

No one likes change. It’s an intrinsic piece of human nature. Be prepared for this to play out in your conversations with prospects. When you first tell prospects that their existing solution may not meet all of their needs, they will respond by trying to “stretch” their solution to overcome any of the challenges/threats you’ve brought to their attention. In order to help them move off of their status quo, you will have to identify and amplify the clear holes in their approach that will block them from being able to sensibly resolve the issues using what they currently have.

The holes you identify should align perfectly with the capabilities of your solution, which, naturally, can plug the holes.

Use your answers to these questions as the basis for your marketing messages. Focus on helping your prospects realize that their status quo is limiting their potential and threatening their desired outcomes; forget about your prospect’s titles, segments, or personality traits. To get your prospects to make the decision to change and then choose your solution, you must appeal to their survival instincts and help them realize the limitations/holes of their current solution, and demonstrate how your solution can be everything they need and more.
INTRODUCTION

Babe Ruth is widely accepted to be the greatest baseball player of all time. Yet it almost never happened.

At the beginning of his career, Babe Ruth stepped up to the plate towing a 54-ounce bat. By comparison, the average weight of a bat used in the MLB today is between 31 to 35 ounces.

You may be asking yourself: Why did he use such a heavy bat? A fierce batter from the beginning, he wanted to hit the most home runs, and to do so he thought he needed to use the heaviest bat he could lift. Logically, this makes sense because force equals mass times acceleration (F = MA), right? Not quite. You see, in following his instinct to use a heavier bat (the mass), Babe Ruth forgot to factor in the bat speed (the acceleration).

If he had followed his original instincts throughout his career, Babe Ruth would likely have been a good baseball player, but he wouldn’t have achieved one of the highest batting averages of all time – on top of his home-run-hitting prowess. However, he adjusted his approach and during what was arguably his best season – that of 1927, when he hit 60 home runs – Babe Ruth used a bat that weighed just 40 ounces, allowing him to increase his bat speed.

Similar to the Great Bambino, many marketers and salespeople have the right intentions but the wrong instincts when it comes to their messages.

For example, look at this list of messaging intentions/instincts:

- Help your customers/give them as much information as possible to make a decision.
- Show your depth and professionalism/use sophisticated language and industry jargon.
- Build relationships with your customers/keep customers happy and never challenge their point of view.
- Deliver your message in a memorable way/use clever copy and stunning, highly polished graphics and photography.

In each case, your intention is good, but your instinct is bad. Now, you can still be modestly successful with bad instincts, but to be the best – to be a legend in your own right – you need to be open to reconsidering your traditional messaging instincts.

Based on the list above, you’ll find four ways to improve your messaging instincts on the next page.

“To be a legend, you need to be open to reconsidering your traditional messaging instincts.”

Don’t Let Your Marketing Messages Swing and Miss

Find your “value wedge”
Find your story
Bring business insights
Draw pictures

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Most marketers believe prospects need more content to make a decision than they actually do. In reality, since your prospects and customers already think you are essentially the same as your competitors, they are really looking for you to emphasize the incremental differences that matter to their businesses. By giving too much information about things that put you at parity, you will be validating their notion that your market is becoming a commodity. Instead, you want to zero in on those areas where you do something that is important to the customer, and it is a unique or advantaged capability – or you deliver it in a better way. We call this finding your value wedge. In short, resist the instinct to pile on more information than your prospects and customers need. Be simple and concrete.

If you use exactly the same industry jargon, phrases, and rehashed messaging as your competitors, what will you get? A story that sounds exactly like everyone else. Your prospects don’t want you to show off your lexicon of acronyms and fancy-pants words; they want you to “make meaning” out of all the raw data and information that is growing faster than their time to process it. You add value and help create a decision-making environment for your customers when you choose simple, concrete words that are clear and easy to understand. In addition, the part of the brain that makes decisions to change is very simple and doesn’t have the capacity for language, so you often need to make a concrete point with a visual that depicts your message (see point number 4).

Asking 20 questions about where your customers are having pain, and telling them all about the great features and benefits of your products, does not add value for them. Recent research from SiriusDecisions indicates that providing industry and business expertise is four times more valuable than having product knowledge and developing good relationships. Your prospects believe you see more people who look like them than they do, so act like it. What insights have you gained from solving problems for other organizations? What problems or opportunities are your prospects missing that they don’t even know about? Messaging that focuses on addressing these points is the kind that will increase the intellectual altitude of your customer conversations.

Being different and memorable often takes place in the delivery of your message, not just the message itself. The replacement of copy and prose with more metaphorical photography and images has made marketing collateral and presentations more beautiful. But they aren’t necessarily different or memorable. The real opportunity lies in turning your messages into stick figures, arrows, boxes, and whimsical icons. Marketing messages come to life when they can be seen. Further, they can be shared more easily when you enable your prospect to retell the same story to others. Your instinct may say that infographics, whiteboards, and other visual storytelling techniques aren’t as professional as polished PowerPoints, but you’d be wrong.
Your Buyers Are Saying One Thing and Doing Another

A recent spate of research from big industry analysts found that buyers believe they are at least 60 percent done with their buying process before they seek out a salesperson.

At the same time, ironically, there is documented evidence that 60 percent of qualified leads end the sales cycle in “no decision,” sticking with their status quo and buying nothing.

So if your prospects are 60 percent set in their decisions before they talk to salespeople, yet 60 percent of the time they choose to do nothing, are they really that close to making a decision?

Before you discard this research as irrelevant, let’s take a closer look at how the outlined issue impacts the content of your marketing messages, how you view your content marketing programs, and the way you decide to enable your salespeople.

Declared Preference vs. Revealed Preference

First, we need to sort out the reality from the rhetoric. What’s going on here is a classic case of what economists call “declared preference” versus “revealed preference.” They’ve known for years that people will say one thing when nothing is on the line, and then behave completely opposite when money and personal reputation is at stake. This explains why buyers can be so confident that they don’t need salespeople – that they are guiding themselves through the buying process – yet become confused, concerned, and get cold feet when they actually have to make the decision.

The key takeaway for you as a marketer is this:

The majority of buyers who think they are almost done with their purchase decisions are not even ready to change, let alone choose a specific company.

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Marketing and Sales as Meaning Makers
Futurist George Dyson said that the most important people in our lives will be the “meaning makers.” They are the ones who can make sense of all the raw information and apply it to help facilitate good and proper decision-making.

Your salespeople with their lips moving are your company’s greatest agents of meaning-making. And your ability as a marketer to help them create a buying vision for your prospects – to arm them with the best stories and skills to help potential customers see the need to change and view your offering as a valuable solution – is what will separate you from your competitors.

For example, you need to develop campaigns based on problems or missed opportunities your prospect may not even realize they have. In the hands of your salespeople, these campaigns will help them with their hardest job – breaking through to get a meeting. Most prospects won’t take a meeting just because you have a new product. But they do want to know whether their objectives are at risk due to unconsidered needs. Helping your salespeople loosen the status quo to help capture that all-important first meeting is an often overlooked marketing step.

Once they get the meeting, your salespeople need to nail it. This doesn’t happen by accident. The winning companies are developing conversation aids, such as whiteboard stories, to drive these dialogues. Most executive buyers prefer conversations, not presentations, so providing your salespeople with provocative stories told with simple, concrete visuals is a great way to position them as consultative sellers with relevant, valuable insight to share. Not to mention that executives tend to participate in the earlier stage, vision-creation meetings, which are much better delivered as a whiteboarding session versus a PowerPoint show.

Death of the Salesman?
The research mentioned earlier tries to convince marketers that the role of a salesperson might be slowly dying. Yet there’s even more recent research that contradicts these findings. The IT Sales and Marketing Association (ITSMA) just published findings stating that 70 percent of buyers want to engage with sales reps before they identify their shortlist – suggesting that the earlier research may be exaggerated at best, misleading at worst.

Instead of being relegated to the very last moments of a purchase decision and abdicating the majority of the buying cycle to marketing, ITSMA’s research reveals that salespeople are becoming even more crucial to helping buyers make a decision.

With such conflicting studies, I’ll once again refer you to the actual behavior of the buyers. The majority still need the help of a salesperson to make the decision to change – and make the decision to choose you. And it’s still your job to equip and enable your No. 2 communications channel – which is the spoken words taking place between a buyer and your company’s representative: the salesperson.
Problem Finding vs. Problem Solving
Your Messaging Needs to Get in Front of Your Customers

Your products and services “are far more valuable when your prospect is mistaken, confused, or completely clueless about their true problem.”
– Daniel Pink, “To Sell Is Human”

Huh? What?

Think about it. If your prospects know precisely what their problems are, they can often find the information they need to make their decisions – with limited assistance or input from your salespeople. They can also typically find multiple vendors with the specified products to meet their identified needs – putting you at parity with all the others.

As a result, your ability to get prospects to do something different, choose you, and pay a premium hinges less on problem-solving skills and more on problem-finding skills.

What Does This Mean for Marketing and Sales Messaging?

If your messaging is like that of most companies, then you typically address buyers’ identified needs and match them with your capabilities. The problem with this approach, however, is that when you position and sell solutions to these known needs, you are responding to the same situation as your competitors.

This is a trap. When you’re selling to the same needs as your competitors, with a similar set of solutions, prospects can’t see the difference, and your conversations end up focusing on one thing – lowering the price.

Problem Solving Puts You at Parity With Everyone Else

To escape the commodity trap, you need to create messaging that helps prospects see their situations in fresh, more revealing ways. You need to identify problems they don’t even realize they have. According to Pink, “problem finding” becomes the necessary quality in your marketing and sales messaging if you stand any chance of differentiating yourself.

“Problem finding” becomes the necessary quality in your marketing and sales messaging if you stand any chance of differentiating yourself.
As a first step to accomplishing this, you must find the “unconsidered needs” that exist beyond the obvious identified needs. Dig hard to find the unknown, undervalued, unmet challenges that your prospects and customers aren’t even thinking about. Then determine where your solution’s strengths align with specific, unconsidered needs to create what I’m calling “unconsidered value opportunities.”

It’s at this intersection between unconsidered needs and strengths that you can create value for prospects in a way that you are uniquely qualified to deliver.

**Your New Job Description: Meaning Maker**

In the past, buyers faced information gaps when it came to solving problems on their own. They relied on sellers to help them make a purchase decision because sellers had the information advantage. But today there’s information equality, meaning buyers can do a lot more themselves and sellers are scrambling to figure out how to remain relevant. Pink calls this the transition from “buyer beware to seller beware.”

The premium on marketing messaging and sales interactions is your ability to turn all of the raw information into something meaningful. Your new job title should be *Chief Meaning Maker* – not *Content Marketer*.

*Finding the right problem to solve, and framing problems in interesting ways, is where you will bring value to future selling conversations.*
Create Insight Without Merely Delivering Factoids

There has been a lot of talk lately about selling with “insights” as a superior way to engage. I agree.

When selling with insights, though, the challenge becomes: How do you determine whether something is actually an insight? Unfortunately, most who espouse the insight model don’t help you understand the science behind decision-making that makes something an insight versus just an interesting factoid – and how to transfer that insight in a way that gets the desired response.

Definitions of Insight
Gary Klein, scientist and author of “The Power of Intuition” and “Seeing What Others Don’t,” identifies two primary ways insights work:

1. Personal Insights: The first deals with how individuals develop insights for themselves. When you get stuck trying to solve a problem, and your current assumptions about a situation are not working, you realize you’ve been making inappropriate assumptions and try to find a way to get beyond it – and you fixate on the faulty assumption until you find another way.

2. Interpersonal Insights: The second deals with how you can help someone else gain a new insight. Simply put, it comes down to helping people see the inconsistencies in their current thinking. You can share information about what they should be doing better or different, but the key to unlocking the insight is creating an environment that allows people to self-identify the inconsistencies in their beliefs.

Everyone has “go-to” frames for making a decision. When presented with a new problem to solve, you and I default to familiar mental models. But if you want prospects to do something different, it is your job to first help them break down these patterns by changing the stories they are using to make choices.

“Arriving at insights isn’t a question of pushing new information on people and trying to explain it in words,” Klein said. “It’s more about helping people see the inconsistency in themselves, and then all of a sudden the mental model will shift naturally and easily.”

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A Factoid Is Not an Insight
I hope you already see the fallacy of most insight-development efforts. Companies are collecting various facts and stats and throwing them out, acting like the data point is an insight. Clearly it is not.

First, you must add value by infusing meaning into the factoid in terms of the impact it has on the currently held assumptions of the person you are sharing it with.

You need to disrupt the old pattern-matching that is happening subconsciously in your prospects’ heads. Specifically, you must help them mentally simulate how a new fact impacts their status quo.

Help them “try on” the fact in such a way that they can literally feel how their current assumptions may be inappropriate for the decision at hand.

Many of the facts that companies share today in the name of insights merely serve to confirm people’s intuition about their key objectives or critical business issues. Trust me, your prospects already know they need to generate more revenue, cut costs, streamline processes, hire the best people, increase their competitiveness, shorten their time to market, and expand their global footprint.

Stop sharing facts that simply corroborate something someone already knows. It is not insight. There is no sense of urgency. And you have done nothing to discourage the mental models that perpetuate the status quo.

Give Your Facts Context
The real power of insight is going a layer deeper to introduce an unconsidered or unknown statistic that actually puts these intuitively obvious objectives at risk. Expose a gap or deficiency that your prospects didn’t know or amplify a challenge that they have undervalued. The fact or stat alone will not create the insight, but giving it context in a way that defies your prospect’s repertoire of typical decision-making patterns will.

For example, everyone agrees that keeping high school kids away from drugs, tobacco, and alcohol is a good thing for the child personally as well as society as a whole. If you were speaking with a high school principal about a new prevention program – simply sharing the frightening stats behind injuries, deaths, and other bad things that happen when kids dabble in mind-altering substances – that is not an insight.

But what if you could show the principal that the D.A.R.E. program often used in schools has no scientific evidence to prove it works, yet 70 percent of schools still use it? And what if you could demonstrate that there’s a hint it may actually increase the use of alcohol and tobacco? (This is true, by the way.) How might that change the receptivity to your program, when you start to help them see why current programs fail and how your program fixes those failure points?

You need to ask yourself, “What are your prospects doing today that they don’t even realize is potentially harmful to their critical business issues?”

What evidence can you provide to show them that their current assumptions are actually holding them back? Do you have stats and facts that confirm these counterintuitive concepts?

Creating and delivering insight demands that you first help your prospects “see” and “feel” the inconsistencies in their current thinking before they can even begin to imagine making a change to do something different, let alone care about the thing you are trying to sell them.

How are you turning your research, facts, and stats into actual insights?
Messaging Deployment

There's a lot of money and wasted resources disappearing into the gap between marketing and sales, as marketing content goes unused and your message becomes diluted and nearly unrecognizable once it gets into the field. Think of this as “No Brand’s Land,” where quality, consistent messaging goes to die. How do you avoid losing your messaging to the abyss? How do you successfully bridge your story into the field sales channel? Check out these articles to learn how to improve the usefulness and ‘stickiness’ of your message deployment by enabling your salespeople with content they’ll actually use – and messaging your prospects will remember.

**Articles:**

- [The Forgotten Alignment Point: 3 Steps Marketers Need to Take to Enable Sales Success](#)
- [Whiteboard vs. PowerPoint: Enabling Sales to Tell Visual Stories](#)
- [Content Must Drive Conversion, Not Make BFFs](#)
- [Being Sticky With Salespeople](#)
- [Customer-Centric Marketing Requires a Bipartisanship Approach](#)
- [Demand-Generation Success: Awakening the Old Brain](#)
INTRODUCTION

The regional sales leader for a major manufacturing company once said to me: “Sales leads are very good. But it’s one thing to know where to show up. It’s an even bigger deal to know what to say when you get there. And there’s nothing in my CRM system that tells me that.”

When people talk about marketing and sales alignment, they usually start with demand generation and qualified leads. A lot has been written about this topic, and many companies have put great effort into programming and automation. However, they’re missing a key link: what I call the “forgotten alignment point,” or what salespeople actually say when they get to a meeting. As a B2B marketing executive, you must arm your salespeople with the ability to have a great conversation with the prospect – one that speaks to his or her needs and provides a bolt of fresh, revealing insight that makes the salesperson relevant and valuable. In many circles, this is referred to as sales enablement and is becoming absolutely critical for the success of your campaigns.

You also need to connect with this emerging corporate discipline because the success of all your new product launches, go-to-market strategies, and campaigns still rely on your salespeople with their lips moving in front of a prospect or customer.

**Customer Conversations Are an Alignment Opportunity**

In its recent Growth Team Membership (GTM) survey for the Americas, Frost & Sullivan asked marketers about their biggest challenges. Ahead of many of the traditional concerns, developing a great message and story that causes prospects and customers to care – to create a compelling value proposition – was cited as marketing’s top struggle.

A lot of companies have defined their segments, targeting prospects and customers pretty tightly, so the challenge isn’t necessarily knowing where to go or who to speak with. Rather, it’s knowing what to say that will cause prospects to want to change – and then choose you.

**Marketing’s Top Struggle**

Developing a great message and story that causes prospects and customer to care.

How do you ensure your messaging and tools don’t get lost in translation between marketing and sales?

Watch the video >>

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What you say and how you say it is becoming your biggest point of differentiation.
Here are three steps to create greater alignment around your value messaging and ensure you create compelling content that gets delivered in the field with confidence:

1. Team up for value messaging development:
Message development can’t be done in a vacuum – and it can’t be done without seeking input from key stakeholders across the value chain. Marketing must work with sales to create messages that salespeople feel comfortable delivering to prospects. This will ensure that your messages are on-point, speaking to your prospects’ story – not your company’s story – and that the materials you create will actually be used.

Be sure to include product/service subject matter experts and salespeople who have demonstrated success speaking with your target audience in a cross-functional workshop to determine your value message. Asking customers what pains and problems they are having only gives you a sense of what they know, but it’s usually what prospects don’t know and a fear that they may be missing out on something that will cause them to actually listen to your message.

Identifying a customer’s problem, the pain it will cause, and why the market’s current approach is inadequate or unsustainable will make your message relevant. Then your sales team can put the problem into a context that customers will care about, in a way they will want to share it, and with sufficient urgency to get them to reconsider their status quo.

Having the combination of marketing and sales in the same room to shape the message will ensure that you keep it customer-focused, while at the same time pointing to a unique strength of your solution. It will also improve the message launch and adoption in the field to promote the fact that it was vetted by key players that the sales team respects.

2. Timing is everything for value messaging deployment:
Salespeople understand that you have to reach out to prospects at the appropriate point during their decision-making process with a tailored message that speaks to their specific needs. For example, in early-stage executive conversations you must deliver messages that loosen the status quo. Prospects need to see a reason to change before you can tell them why you are the best answer. In later stages, your messaging needs to create a clear contrast between you and the competition to make sure the customer understands your value and picks you.

Make sure your messaging is relevant to where customers are in their decision-making process. Most companies’ natural drift is to lead with why their company is the best and why their solution is the best answer. However, in a recent Forrester roundtable, participants indicated that 65 percent of decision-makers will give their business to the company that “creates the buying vision.” This means they need to hear from you and your salespeople about why they should even consider change. They want to hear your insights about their current situation, the issues in the market, and the potential business impact if they maintain their status quo. As a result, you need to make sure you are creating value messages, along with campaigns and selling tools focused around these “why change” messages.

Next, you need to look at the specific interactions that occur along the buying cycle, understand the conversations your salespeople have at each moment, and make sure that the selling tools and assets are designed to match the actual selling task. These moments require significant messaging, but if the tools don’t match the type of interaction, your message won’t be well-received.

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3. Practice, practice, practice the value messaging delivery:

A recent Aberdeen Research report on improving sales performance revealed that best-in-class companies are focusing on “improving sales conversations” as their top initiative for increasing performance in a tough economy. In other words, the moments when salespeople are moving their lips are where companies are investing for optimal impact over other sales improvement alternatives.

The importance of training your salespeople to deliver your value messages in an engaging and memorable way cannot be underestimated. For many organizations, there is a large disconnect between sales training and the customer conversation. In some companies, sales training is product training – the training group reports to product management, and the entire training focus is around getting salespeople to memorize and certify on the product speeds and feeds. At other companies, sales training is dedicated to sales processes and negotiating. Agreeing that companies should follow a common approach to running deals, but only teaching salespeople where to show up and who to interact with, has nothing to do with what they actually need to say and how they should say it when talking with a prospect or customer.

If you adhere to these three steps for aligning your marketing and sales teams, then your salespeople will be more successful in having effective and engaging conversations with your prospects – and will ultimately win more business.
The first hurdle marketing content creators have to clear when creating messaging for salespeople is recognizing that the majority of selling conversations are delivered in the spoken word, not the written word.

As a result, text-heavy marketing tools, including whitepapers, brochures, and detailed case studies, are not effective sales aids. That leaves PowerPoint presentations as the visual tool of choice to support spoken words.

While PowerPoint presentations have historically been the go-to sales tool, the current trending strategies are “solution selling” and “consultative selling,” which place an emphasis on selling higher, bundled offerings to increase deal size and selling value so that a higher price is justified.

These approaches embody a tremendous backlash against so-called “show up and throw up” PowerPoint presentation decks. They focus on questioning techniques, discovery calls, and assessments. So what’s a marketer to do? How will you make sure your messages are delivered in a compelling way by salespeople who are being told to have a conversation, not deliver a presentation?

Memory and retention research shows that people remember only about 10 percent of what they hear just one week after hearing it. Spoken words alone are not enough to position your solution and persuade a prospect. (So much for making a big impression with your new selling approach.)

However, in that same research, retention was found to jump to 65 percent when a picture was associated with the key messages being delivered, proving that some sort of visual is still needed. But if you’re steering away from a PowerPoint or a brochure, what can you use?

We need only to turn to our caveman ancestors for the answer: hieroglyphics. Stick figures, arrows, boxes, and whimsical icons drawn on a whiteboard, easel pad, notepad, or napkin will transform your marketing messages into true sales conversation enablement.

My company recently surveyed our database of 6,000 organizations and asked how many of them were beginning to replace PowerPoint with whiteboarding approaches for sales presentations. About 87 percent said they still rely primarily on PowerPoint or no visual tools.
while 13 percent professed to using whiteboarding. Within the latter group, 69 percent admitted that their whiteboards are done ad hoc by salespeople, while 31 percent said they were prebuilding visual stories and training their salespeople to tell them.

If my math is correct, then that means only 4 percent of companies are developing and delivering prebuilt, purposeful whiteboards and training their salespeople to use them. This means there's still a huge opportunity to differentiate your selling conversations if you can bring hand-drawn visual storytelling into your company as a corporate discipline.

Interestingly, a recent Aberdeen Research study indicated that companies that have started using whiteboards instead of PowerPoint also have improved sales performance, including:

- 50% higher lead conversion rate
- 29% shorter time-to-productivity
- 15% shorter sales cycles

While these are correlative findings, you could conclude that whiteboards can drive more effective customer conversations.

**Turn Prose Into Pictures**

What's the next step for marketers? First, I'd recommend you check out a new book called *Whiteboard Selling - Empowering Sales* by Corey Sommers and David Jenkins (Wiley 2013). Don't let the title fool you: This book is as much for marketers looking to add whiteboarding to the sales enablement tool mix as it is for salespeople who want to deliver a differentiated sales conversation experience.

Second, I recommend you start doodling. That's right, put down the PowerPoint clicker and pick up a pen. Challenge yourself to turn your prose into pictures. Remember these three rules for images so you will know you are creating visuals with power and purpose:

1. **CONTEXT**
   Your visual needs to show your prospect's current situation. Don't just draw your solution. Prospects need to see their current status quo as unsafe, so your pictures must depict the gaps and deficiencies in their current state that makes them unsustainable.

2. **CONTRAST**
   Your picture needs to show clear contrast between the status quo and your solution. Depict the "to and from" by showing how your new approach specifically fills the gaps and overcomes the deficiencies of the status quo your visual portrayed earlier. Contrast is required to help the brain determine the virtues of your solution – if there is no contrast, no value will be perceived. This is because the part of the brain you're appealing to does not have the capacity for language, and it craves contrast to help make a decision.

3. **CONCRETE**
   Simple, concrete visuals tell your prospect's brain that the solution is real and doable. Complex and abstract visuals confuse the brain and paralyze it from making a decision. Again, the part of the brain that makes a decision to change – the part you are directing your visual story to – is a very basic functioning area called the "old brain." By using very simple visuals, you are making a complicated concept seem accessible, approachable, and, as a result, doable enough to drive a decision.

Ironically, I just used almost 1,000 words to tell you why you should use whiteboard visuals to improve your sales messaging. To go deeper and see this done using visuals, I recommend you check out a recent webcast I did on the topic using only whiteboard-style visualization.

**Start telling visual stories!** And remember the 3 Cs: Context, Contrast, Concrete.
Content Must Drive Conversion, Not Make BFFs

At a recent industry event on demand generation and content marketing, I almost couldn’t believe my ears and eyes. One of the presenters provided a list of “stages” your content marketing needs to drive your audience through. Stage one, the first level of the relationship, was “awareness.” This made sense, but the final stage listed, the highest order of content marketing relationship, was “BFF” (or best friends forever, for those who don’t have a teenage texting lexicon).

Seriously, that’s why content marketing is such a big deal? A company needs to spend gobs of money to create BFFs?

 Maybe I'm missing something, but all of the talk about aggregating content and becoming a destination for industry information — including your competitors’ content — seems to miss the point entirely. Just rehashing and regurgitating industry facts and “no-duh” conclusions may help with SEO, but it fails to meet the threshold of so-called thought leadership.

Unless your content drives conversion to commercial activity, such as pipeline and revenue, you have nothing, right? What am I missing here? Your teenagers decide their popularity and social media worth by how many “likes” they get. Are you really going to stake your marketing career and budget by having a certain number of likes as your goal?

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Make Sure Your Content Creates Action

Your content needs to have the kind of edge that demands a response. You can do this by making sure your messaging appeals to the part of your prospects' brains that causes them to change a habit or move from their status quo. This is called the "old brain," sometimes referred to as the "lizard brain," and the old brain has very specific requirements your message must meet:

1. CONTEXT
   As mentioned above, the most effective way to change your prospects' mind is to make them see their current status quo as unsafe. Your pictures must depict the gaps and deficiencies in their current state that makes it both unsustainable and requiring a new approach. Don’t just show your solution and describe why it’s great and expect them to leap at the new opportunity. At first, your prospects see your offering as a painful change management project, more painful than the pains they are living with. You need to create a context that flips that perception where they see the pains they are living with as more painful than the pain of change.

2. CONTRAST
   There is no perceived value if there is no contrast. The part of the brain you are appealing to craves contrast to help make a decision, so your picture needs to show clear contrast between the status quo and your solution. Depict the before and after by showing how your new approach specifically fills the gaps and overcomes the deficiencies of the status quo you portrayed earlier. This will help the brain determine the virtues of your solution since it can then visually discern the tangible benefits that you’re proposing.

3. CONCRETE
   Simple, concrete visuals tell your prospect’s brain that the solution you’re proposing is not only real, but also doable. Complex and abstract visuals confuse the brain and paralyze it from making a decision. But by using imagery, such as numbers, arrows, stick figures, shapes, and whimsical icons, you are translating a potentially complicated concept into a simple visual that makes it seem accessible, approachable, and, as a result, doable enough to drive a decision.

3 rules for creating visuals with power and purpose:

Next time you’re faced with developing content for your marketing campaigns, make sure to use visuals that comply with these three rules to incite your prospects to action.

1. The old brain doesn’t have the capacity for language, so it needs pictures to help it wake up and decide to do something.
2. The old brain is a very basic mechanism, similar to an on-/off-switch, so your pictures need to be very simple and concrete, not complex and abstract.
3. This part of the brain is your survival mechanism, so your visuals need to create a context that makes the status quo unsafe and prompts your prospects to take action.
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If you fear that your messages won't get used by salespeople, you aren’t being unreasonable. A quick review of content downloads by your salespeople will likely reveal that, in general, they use less than 30 percent of the content you’ve created, which means 70 percent of your budget and efforts is going to waste, while key content isn’t sticking or getting used.

Meanwhile, your sales enablement experts are wringing their hands because often-repeated statistics indicate that nearly 90 percent of the training they provide is forgotten in less than four weeks after it is delivered. They are desperately looking for something to make the skills they teach your salespeople stick once they reach the field and are in front of customers.

The Answer to Both Dilemmas: Match Stories With Skills

If you want your salespeople to use your messages and tools, then make sure they align with the sales skills and selling processes on which they are trained. The more your content matches the conversation approaches salespeople have been taught to employ with prospects and customers, the more likely they are to use it.

The problem is, today a mismatch exists between the way messages and tools are developed and the way salespeople are taught to sell. Have you looked at the prescriptive sales process and solutions-oriented selling skills your reps are supposed to be using? Do you understand the key steps in the consultative sales process they have put in place to become “trusted advisers”? What kinds of activities and “job aids” are salespeople tasked with using or completing as part of their opportunity or account management plans?

To improve the stickiness of your stories and the desired selling skills, you must make sure you’re developing messages and deploying them in tools that sound like the conversations your salespeople need to have. You also need to ensure the stories match the tasks identified at each stage of the process.

Being Sticky With Salespeople

Salespeople use less than 30% of content created

70% of your budget and efforts is going to waste

90% of training is forgotten in less than 4 weeks

(continued)
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This probably covers 90 percent of the sales processes and conversations skills training in the market today. So the question is: How closely does your messaging mimic this progression? Do you provide content inside of tools that enables the right dialogue at each of these key inflexion points in the buying cycle?

More than likely, your message starts with your products, progresses to the unique features of those products, then describes the benefits of those new and improved capabilities, and finally attempts to describe the value proposition this creates for the customer. This may sound good, but as you can now see, it doesn’t resemble the desired, best practice conversation described above. Your company- and product-centric organizational structures and P&L centers actually compete against the customer-centric interactions that need to take place.

Reconfigure Messages to Match the Process and Communications Tools to Support the Task

Your typical sales process requires a number of job aids, planners, prompters, engagement communications, and other tools to drive and reinforce the right behaviors. Yet none of these coaching and customer-facing tactics is on your marketing communications checklist. Instead, you are building a whole series of collateral and presentation materials that have no resemblance to the primary content-carrying vehicles prescribed for a day-in-the-life of your salespeople.

These standard tools − typically blank templates that must be filled out by individual reps for each deal − are often inspected by managers before a deal is allowed to advance to the next stage of the sales process, but only to make sure they are complete. Instead, managers should grasp this opportunity to drive content deeper into the selling process, improving the consistency and quality of selling conversations. Prepopulating a library of these job aids with your freshly developed customer-centric messaging, which allows salespeople to tweak and edit (as opposed to write from scratch), will generate tremendous alignment between marketing and sales.

Your sales enablement group will love you for this because your stories, and the assets you put them in, will match the skills they’ve been teaching − instead of opposing their principles and best practices.

So, to be sticky with sales, try syncing your stories and skills.
Customer-Centric Marketing Requires Bipartisanship Approach

A recent Aberdeen survey showed that 74 percent of “best performing” B2B companies are bringing marketing and sales together to improve messaging content. This is a big step forward considering these two departments sometimes struggle like Democrats and Republicans to get on the same page.

Bipartisanship typically makes a last-minute appearance when the cause and urgency trumps egos and elections. And that’s what appears to be driving the cooperation inside companies. Commoditization is forcing companies to become more creative about positioning to show differentiated value, while slow market growth and pricing pressures are demanding new approaches for increasing revenue.

In fact, these factors were voted the “top business pressure” and “most important business goal” motivating this new era of marketing and sales alignment, according to Aberdeen.

Fancy Words Tell a Simple Truth
Analysts use fancy words to describe the huge shift taking place in B2B marketing and selling today. Some say it’s the “hidden sales cycle,” where buyers say they are conducting the majority of their purchasing research without the help of salespeople. Others talk about the “integrated demand funnel,” which depicts a seamless buyer’s journey from marketing engagement to sales activities.

But these advanced analyst elocutions all point to a plain, simple truth: Marketing and sales teams must work together to create and deliver more customer needs-centric messages as opposed to company- and product-centric approaches.

Only those companies that can effectively tell an engaging and unique story from the buyer’s perspective will be successful in capturing the mind share and market share they are looking for to meet their revenue goals.

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Five-Step Cross-Functional Message Development Process

The challenge with any cross-functional approach is making sure you actually get to a productive outcome. Here's a simple five-step process to guide your marketing and sales teams to more powerful positioning messaging.

1. **DEFINE THE STATUS QUO YOU WANT TO DEFEAT**
   
   Your starting point isn't a product and its distinct features, nor is it a title or persona of a key decision-maker. Social psychology research proves the most powerful reason people make decisions to change is because of how they see their “situation,” not their professional “disposition.” Determine the current products and processes in use, why customers think they are OK, and what unknown gaps or deficiencies exist that may open the door to a discussion about change.

2. **PUT THEIR STRATEGIC GOALS OR OUTCOMES AT RISK**
   
   Exposing gaps or deficiencies in the status quo gets your prospects’ attention, but you must take the next step and help them see how these challenges are threatening their most important business indicators. Increasing the intellectual altitude of your message requires you to attach the problems to issues of the executive you want to reach. Remember, you get delegated to who you talk like.

3. **INTRODUCE UNCONSIDERED NEEDS TO INCREASE URGENCY**
   
   Identified problems like those uncovered in voice-of-the-customer research can lead your message astray. Why? Because if your prospect already knows the problem, then they figure, “Well, it hasn’t killed me yet, so there’s no rush to resolve it.” As a result, your message needs to be linked to unconsidered needs, which require your cross-functional team to dig deeper to find new, emerging threats, challenges, obligations, and opportunities that your prospect may not realize exist or appreciate the size and speed of impact on his/her business.

4. **CONNECT TO CONTRASTING ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES**
   
   Brain science tells us that to persuade a person to do something differently, you must address their status quo, but quickly show them a “new safe” alternative that specifically eliminates the threats that caused them to flee in the first place. The concept of “contrast” is vital to your story. Make sure your message literally shows contrast between the old way and the new way in order to demonstrate the value of change – and the value of you.

5. **ANSWER THE “WHO ELSE IS DOING THIS?” QUESTION**
   
   The majority of buyers are not visionary. They don’t want to be first. They want to know someone else – like them – who experienced these challenges, made the change, and is finding newfound success because of the different approach. Complementing the contrasting alternative with a customer story is essential for helping new prospects “self-identify” as needing to make the same change and overcome the risk associated with actually doing it.
The first person with the bright idea to create a demand-generation campaign using a whitepaper as a call to action must have been on to something. For the past 20 years, it seems as though everyone thinks they need to offer a whitepaper, analyst report, or some other text-heavy, written-word document as the call to action.

Unfortunately, you’re setting yourself up for failure by taking this approach. You see, there’s a big crinkly part of the brain called the neocortex, or the “new brain,” and it loves to analyze things – and it loves whitepapers. But this isn’t the part of the brain that makes decisions. Decision-making is the job of a completely different part of the brain known as the limbic system, or the “old brain.” The old brain is a basic system without the ability to process words or language. It’s designed to ensure your survival, and it’s the part of the brain that must be activated by demand generation programs if you want to move your prospects to a purchase decision.

To successfully generate demand, you must awaken the old brain and make sure your prospect knows that his or her status quo is no longer safe.

(Come to think of it, I’m a little worried the words of this article aren’t waking your old brain. If you want to hear and see this message, watch this brief video for the rest of the story.)
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This approach starts with the messaging you create, which must do four things:

1. **Be willing to challenge prospects' assumptions about their existing approach.**
2. **Show your prospects how their world is changing and create urgency to respond.**
3. **Get prospects to see that their outcomes and objectives are at risk if they don’t do anything.**
4. **Provide a clear contrasting alternative that moves prospects to a “new safe.”**

Once you’ve built your message and awakened the old brain, you must tell your story visually. Be sure to use visual images that the old brain craves, including those that appeal to emotions and highlight contrast. Use images that bring your story to life, like pictures that clearly depict the problem and illuminate the pain and risk to your prospect’s business objectives. This should be followed by an image that resolves those challenges with a visually contrasting new way to solve them.

**Demand for Video**

You are taking a huge risk if you aren’t using video as the main component of your content and demand-generation strategy. The explosion of smartphones and tablets is driving demand for more mobile and video content. As a result, your prospects are going to expect that they can do their research while watching videos – not reading PDFs. If you add this shift to the old brain’s need for visual storytelling, then the imperative for you to embrace video is irrefutable.

Recently, a test was conducted to determine the effectiveness of video in demand generation programs. To promote a webcast, emails were sent and social media promotions were carried out that pushed prospects to a landing page with additional information and the opportunity to register for the online event.

Simultaneously, another group was sent emails and targeted through social media, but there was an additional step – a quick three-minute promotional video embedded in the email highlighting the big ideas contained in the webcast. Following the video, prospects were then directed to the same landing page as the first group.

Guess what? The second approach, the one with the video, drove three times more registrants than the more simple, one-step approach.

As the business landscape becomes increasingly mobile, salespeople and marketers can no longer ignore the brain science that supports visual storytelling and the use of video in demand-generation campaigns as a more effective way to reach prospects and help them make a purchase decision. Don’t believe me? I’d urge you to conduct a test of your own. You won’t regret it.
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In B2B marketing, your salespeople, with their lips moving, still represent your top channel for branding and differentiation. And, what’s the #1 challenge preventing salespeople from hitting their quota? It’s their inability to articulate value, according to sales management. You can develop a powerful message, but its success in the market depends on your sales team's ability and confidence in delivering it powerfully when they get in front of your customers. Check out these articles to learn how to prepare your salespeople to deliver value conversations throughout the entire sales cycle – from demand generation, to executive conversations, to final negotiations.

Articles:

- Declared vs. Revealed Preference Threatens Usefulness of VOC Research
- The Next Big Breakthrough in Marketing and Sales Messaging – Maybe
- Discounting Is a Marketing Problem
- Avoiding Giveaways Can Make You More Interesting to Prospects
- Sell Higher!: Tips for Increasing Your Strategic Altitude
- Avoid These 3 Mistakes for a Successful B2B Product Launch
Declared vs. Revealed Preference Threatens Usefulness of VOC Research

Marketers who rely heavily on voice-of-the-customer (VOC) research to develop their marketing messages are potentially being undermined by a phenomenon called “declared preference.” Believe it or not, customers and prospects don’t always react the way they say they will in focus groups and market research.

It’s why people may say they are “aggressive” investors when their financial planners do an assessment, but start panicking and pulling money from the market as soon as they lose a few points from their earnings, let alone their principles.

It’s also why people say they want higher gas mileage cars, and will even be willing to pay extra for “green” cars (and other environmentally friendly products), only to have those cars sit on the lots and green merchandise linger on the shelves.

VOC Doesn’t Identify Willingness to Change
VOC research identifies a declared or stated preference, while the actual decisions or behaviors represent “revealed preference.” As it turns out, it’s easier to respond in certain ways when there is no cost involved. You can answer more confidently in the hypothetical than you will perform in reality when money and reputation are part of the equation.

Your prospects can say all kinds of things and demonstrate all measures of bravado, as long as they don’t actually have to change anything. But in the actual decision-making process, the first “yes” you must get is their agreement to do something different than they are doing today. They have to say “yes” to taking the risk and making a change.

In VOC, prospects will tell you what they know. Those problems, challenges, and pains they express, while real, are not significant enough to get them to change. Why? Because they’ve already figured out how to work around those issues. So your so-called solution and the change management needed to bring you in looks more painful than the pains they are living with.

“You have to make the pain of remaining the same greater than the pain of change.”

How does your buyers’ declared (vs. revealed) preference impact your messaging development efforts?

Watch the video >>

(continued)
You have to make the pain of remaining the same greater than the pain of change. Interestingly, the problems, challenges, threats, gaps, or deficiencies that will cause prospects to reconsider their status quo are often unknown to them, or at a minimum, they are undervalued and underappreciated.

“Why Change” Messaging Transcends VOC
For your marketing messaging to be successful, you will need to deliberately create “why change” stories. I’m not talking about gratuitous references to customer pains at the beginning of your campaigns or collateral. You need to think about the entire first half of the customer buying cycle as creating a buying vision where the customer understands that his/her status quo is no longer safe, and gains a sense of urgency for change.

Use the knowledge of your solution’s unique and relevant strengths, as well as your collective experience solving problems for customers, integrated with your efforts to peer into the future of your industry and create an early-stage, executive-level story:

**1. DISRUPT**
Your messages, presentations, and conversations need to deliberately provoke and disrupt the status quo in order to “wake” the part of the brain that decides to change.

**2. VISUALIZE**
You will need to visualize the gaps in your customers’ current assumptions and show how these are putting their desired outcomes at risk. Simple pictures are needed to make the situation concrete and easy enough to grasp.

**3. AMPLIFY**
Then, use third-party stats and results to show the magnitude and imminence of the potential negative impact if these things are left unchecked. This context creates a sense of urgency for change.

**4. CONTRAST**
Finally, you must put your offering in direct contrast to what’s broken, and show how you make it better. There must be enough contrast between the status quo and your solution for the prospect to see value in changing.

Following these four steps will help you craft marketing messages that create more opportunities and drive more purchase decisions in your favor.
The Next Big Breakthrough in Marketing and Sales Messaging – Maybe

If you want to get more attention and be more persuasive with your marketing and sales messages, then you will be better off expressing some uncertainty versus complete certainty when presenting your big idea.

In his cleverly titled paper "Believe Me, I Have No Idea What I’m Talking About," Stanford Business School professor Zak Tormala says if you are an expert on a subject, you actually stand to lose the opportunity to influence by expressing too high a degree of certainty for your opinions. Instead, you can gain more engagement by hedging your recommendations.

Across multiple experiments, Tormala documented consistently negative effects on buyer involvement and persuasion in situations where experts presented stronger arguments. But he found greater quality effects on buyer attitudes, interest, intentions, and favorability when those same experts curbed their confidence levels.

These results seem to fly in the face of traditional buyer confidence research that speaks to something called “source certainty.” This says that people believe something to be more true or right if the source delivers a message with more certainty. For example, a financial adviser who shows high levels of confidence in his or her recommendations performs significantly better than one who is less sure.

Tormala points out, however, that most marketing and sales messages are less objective or absolute than an investment recommendation. Most times, you’re trying to influence buyers to make decisions that are subjective judgment calls – for example, getting prospects to decide whether they need to make a change, and whether they need to make it now.

It’s in these less concrete customer conversations where cracks in the concept of source certainty begin to appear. In fact, Tormala calls his counterintuitive findings “source incongruity.”

Source incongruity works because it violates the audience’s expectations, Tormala says. This, in turn, stimulates involvement and processing, which promote persuasion. The keyword here is that it “promotes” persuasion. Tormala points out that it doesn’t necessarily “increase” persuasion. Rather, it increases the openness and interest of the audience, providing an opportunity to elaborate, which can boost or undermine persuasion, depending on argument quality.

Source incongruity works because it violates the audience’s expectations, Tormala says. This, in turn, stimulates involvement and processing, which promote persuasion. The keyword here is that it “promotes” persuasion. Tormala points out that it doesn’t necessarily “increase” persuasion. Rather, it increases the openness and interest of the audience, providing an opportunity to elaborate, which can boost or undermine persuasion, depending on argument quality.
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What This Means for Your Messaging

To be clear, argument quality, the soundness of your point of view, and the strength of your supporting arguments still matter. But to create a more receptive audience, consider launching your big idea initially as something with a lot of possibility – instead of stating it with absolute positivity.

You also need to consider the impact on delivery style. Consider communicating your message as a conversation, not a presentation. Too often, experts come in with finely polished PowerPoint-level certainty, when instead they should look for ways to be more authentic, delivering their thought leadership in a consultative, collaborative whiteboard-type experience.

On a side note, the conclusions described here are specifically for those who are positioned as experts. Source incongruity, according to Tormala, works exactly the opposite when the messenger is not perceived to be an expert. People lacking established expertise can expand their persuasive impact by strategically incorporating expressions of higher certainty into their messages, he says.

Tormala cited when people go online for product and service recommendations from other customers as an example of when nonexperts can have more impact if they communicate with greater confidence.


“Too often, experts come in with finely polished PowerPoint-level certainty, when instead they should look for ways to be more authentic, delivering their thought leadership in a consultative, collaborative whiteboard-type experience.”
Discounting Is a Marketing Problem

A 1 percent change in discounting has nearly a 9 percent impact on your operating margins, according to McKinsey and Co. That means a seemingly small slipup can have a devastating impact – or a small improvement can have huge potential.

Don’t Try to Beat the Buzzer

Almost every salesperson has been put through some sort of negotiation skills training. The idea is to see whether you can avoid unnecessary discounting when your deal goes into the purchasing department.

If you are a sports fan, you have seen these phrases: Hail Mary, buzzer beater, and walk-off. What each of these terms has in common is they are all last-second “plays,” often made out of desperation to snatch a win from the jaws of defeat. While they make for spectacular highlights, no team counts on these last-ditch attempts as part of their everyday strategy for delivering a winning season. Instead, they prepare a plan designed to win the game outright and avoid these desperate do-or-die attempts.

Just as athletes must look to overarching winning strategies, you need to look at protecting your pricing and margins throughout the entire buying cycle – not just at the end. Last-minute saves inside of the procurement phase is not a strategy for avoiding unnecessary discounting. It requires a disciplined, well-planned approach throughout the entire customer acquisition process.

Here’s the premise: Your pricing doesn’t simply fall apart at the end of a buying cycle. Rather, throughout your conversations with prospects, the perceived value of your solution is diminishing, or leaking. It happens when your prospects compare and contrast your offering with their companies’ needs, and it happens when they look for differences between you and your competitors. By the time it comes to the negotiations, your buyers often believe you and two other competitors could do the job, and so they tell procurement to “do their job.”

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Plug Value Leaks Early
Plugging these "value leaks" requires marketing’s involvement. The problem is really a value story issue—not a negotiations skills issue. Here are three key principles for creating and capturing maximum value with a disciplined, purposeful set of sales-ready messaging content.

1. IDENTIFY UNCONSIDERED NEEDS
You have to be able to go beyond solving for your prospects’ known wants, needs, and pain points. The greater value lies in finding the unconsidered needs and demonstrating how your approach uniquely solves those issues. You need to proactively identify a range of undervalued, unexpected, or otherwise unmet problems or missed opportunities your prospects might be facing.

Then, put together your strongest story for closing those gaps and deficiencies by aligning them with the strengths of your offering that prospects wouldn’t have been able to specify. It’s at the intersection between an unconsidered need and your unrequested capabilities where you can create a better story that provides additional value and helps protect pricing.

2. PROVIDE PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS
Traditional assessment and qualification questions put you at parity with everyone else. These interactions don’t differentiate you and won’t do anything to create greater value. After identifying your unconsidered needs story, you need to create a set of provocative questions that steer the conversation in the direction of these needs and your relevant strengths.

If you are truly introducing unconsidered needs, then there won’t be enough open-ended diagnostic questions to get your prospects where you want them. In fact, typical discovery checklists can create more problems by opening up issues you can’t solve, or by getting prospects excited about things where your offerings are more at parity with everyone else.

Provocative questions get prospects to think differently about the situation they are in; identify problems or missed opportunities they might not even be aware of; amplify the pains and impact of these emerging issues; get them thinking about the new needs, considerations, and requirements they should be solving for; and position your capabilities as the answer to these scenarios.

3. ESTABLISH PIVOTAL AGREEMENTS
Another area where value leaks out during the buying cycle (and before procurement) is the endless series of “freebies” your prospects ask for and your salespeople give them. There are five or six moments of truth in every opportunity that are predictable and repeatable, where you need to document the “ask” you know the prospect is going to make, and identify a corresponding agreement you should get in exchange for meeting that request.

I call these “pivotal agreements.” In the past, when your prospect would ask for a reference call or site visit early in the process, your salesperson would simply make that happen. Today, turn this moment into a key moment to establish a pivotal agreement. Ask for access to certain executive decision-makers in return. If a prospect asks for a free demonstration or pilot, instead of giving it away, create a pivotal agreement that asks for certain volume commitments in exchange. If your prospect asks for free consulting services, offer a pivotal agreement that asks for access to key information, data, and dashboards you may need to develop an airtight business case.

Exchange value instead of giving it away. These pivotal agreements can be identified, developed, and integrated into the selling process to help protect and maximize value along the buying process—instead of playing for one grand bargain at the end.

These three principles can drive a disciplined approach to the early-stage business decision-maker conversations that will plug your value leaks and put you in a much better position for when the deal is turned over to procurement. However, ideally, you will not be entering the last phase with a much higher target, and you’ll have a head start on protecting that powerful 1 percent.

Pivotal Agreement Examples:
- Client asks for sales call:
  Ask for access to certain executive decision-makers in return
- Prospect asks for free demonstration:
  Ask for certain volume commitments in exchange
- Prospect asks for free consulting:
  Ask for key information and data to develop an airtight business case
Avoiding Giveaways Can Make You More Interesting to Prospects

When your sales reps are in a heated, competitive selling situation, often they’re tempted to throw in “value-added” features, or giveaways, that the prospect hasn’t identified as part of his reason for making a purchase decision.

The thinking behind this is that these “bonus capabilities” will tip the scale in their favor when everything else is considered equal.

Guess what? Not only does it not give sales reps an advantage, it actually does the opposite and pushes prospects toward the competition.

Decision-making research shows that when you add a feature that is “positive, but weak or irrelevant” to the conversation, it actually provides a reason against choosing your option, especially when competing options are otherwise equally attractive (Shafrir, Simonson, Tversky, 1993). According to the study, the “addition of a potentially attractive feature that proves useless to the reasons someone is making a decision can provide a reason to reject your offering in favor of an alternative offering, which has no ‘wasted’ features.”

Ironic and Unfortunate

Ironic, isn’t it? Your sales teams have been thinking they were adding value to create differentiation and influence your prospects’ choices by adding more features that they didn’t have to pay for (just like in those late-night commercials for knives that include a free juicer).

But now you know those supposed value-added features may not add so much value. In fact, they only serve to give your prospects a reason not to choose you.

In their book “Choices, Values, and Frames,” Nobel prize-winner Daniel Kahneman and the late Amos Tversky, of decision-making behavior, provide an edited collection of research on the science of the article I quoted earlier. Often the findings from these experimental and empirical studies fly in the face of intuition and conventional wisdom about rational decision-making.
INTRODUCTION

How confident are you that your product positioning, sales messaging, and customer conversations align with the principles found in research on choice, decision, and value? Or are you betting on intuition and otherwise, unexamined folklore?

Creating a Context for Urgency

If you find that your company has "unrequested capabilities" that you believe will add significant value, then you need to find a way to have your prospect ask for them. You also need to make sure your sales reps are creating the context that makes those capabilities necessary and urgent throughout their conversations.

FEATURES BECOME THE ANSWER – NOT A WASTED THROW-IN.

1. Identify an unconsidered need you can uniquely address.

2. Expose prospects to what they are missing and the risks involved.

3. Show a compelling visual that exposes the challenges and how to resolve them.

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To start, identify a previously unconsidered need that your unique or advantaged capability addresses. Then, amplify that need by having your reps show the prospect what they are missing – in terms of problems or opportunities they weren’t aware existed – and the risk this places on their desired outcomes.

Prospects must literally be shown a compelling visual that exposes these hidden challenges, and how the previously unspecified capabilities are essential to resolving them.

Selling the Problem, Not the Product

By reworking the messaging and positioning your sales reps use throughout customer conversations, you will transform your company’s solution in the eyes of prospects. Suddenly, its features will look like answers to a problem and a value-added opportunity, instead of a wasted throw-in.

Think about applying your best marketing muscle to selling the problem, not the product.
Sell Higher!: Tips for Increasing Your Strategic Altitude

You want your salespeople to engage more senior-level decision-makers, but simply telling them to “sell higher” doesn’t make it so. Instead, you need to take three key steps to help your front-line players rise to this expectation.

Business Acumen Gap

Analyst firm SiriusDecisions did some research with executive buyers and found that executive decision-makers prefer to have a discussion about business trends, business issues, and business insights four times more than traditional relationship and product knowledge-driven sales conversations.

Interestingly, Forrester did similar research. It discovered that these executive buyers believe salespeople know their products very well and can engage around their products 88 percent of the time – but their ability to talk about business issues is valuable only about 24 percent of the time. Put these two pieces of research together, and you’ll discover that your salespeople are four times less likely to be good at the very conversation your executive decision-makers desire four times more. This is a significant “business acumen gap” among your sales teams.

This gap’s negative impact on company growth was validated when TrainingIndustry.com recently compared the training emphasis between high-performing companies and average-performing companies. What they found is that “average-performing companies” were more likely to focus on traditional training, such as products and services training, whereas “high-performing” or “best-in-class companies” emphasize “executive selling skills” training and “business/financial acumen” training two times more than the average performing companies.

Increasing Strategic Altitude

So how do you get your salespeople to rise to this new expectation? If pilots want to increase the altitude of a plane, they need to do three things in combination:

• Increase the angle of attack of the wings.
• Increase the thrust of the engine to increase speed.
• Increase the surface area or shape of the wing.

Similarly, your salespeople need to do three things in combination to increase their strategic altitude and “climb” to higher-level conversations:

Increase their competence in business and financial acumen.

Increase their confidence going toe-to-toe with a CxO.

Increase the quality of the story to be more compelling.

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INTRODUCTION

Competence
One of the big causes of failure in executive conversations is that your salespeople don't know what they need to know to be relevant to this audience. We've done extensive buyer-side research with C-level executives on how salespeople can effectively and credibly engage executive-level decision-makers – in other words, what behaviors and knowledge will get them in the door and through a successful sales call, and which ones won't.

That research led to the identification of five related – but distinct – core competencies that are critical to getting value out of any sales conversation, from understanding your customer's business, to preparing your business case, to engaging the customer executives who make investment decisions.

The senior executives also helped establish fluency targets – where your salespeople need to be in terms of understanding the concepts and being articulate around them. During the past few years, we've assessed more than 20,000 sales professionals from companies worldwide, in industries ranging from technology to health care, to determine how competent they actually are in each of these five areas.

What we've found is that, on average, salespeople exhibit only about 50 percent of the business knowledge and savviness that your customers' executive-level buyers desire. In most grade books, that's failing.

In order to achieve a state of competence in executive conversations, you must know these competencies and help your salespeople become more proficient in connecting the dots between your solutions and these critical areas.

Confidence
Unfortunately, any level of competence can quickly disappear when your salespeople walk into that critical moment of truth, standing in front of an executive decision-maker, about to open their mouths and tell your story. So the second big challenge you need to address is confidence.

Imagine this is your prospect’s headquarters building, and your target executive customer is sitting in the top offices. Typically, your salespeople are very confident talking to folks who live down in the bottom half of the building – the ones who care about what your solution is and what it does.

For example, one organization I’ve worked with, a multibillion-dollar professional services company, looked at the opportunities in its CRM system and found that only 10 percent were associated with an executive-level contact. Its reps weren’t ascending the ranks and reaching the real decision-makers.

Why not? Fear. Fear is like gravity, acting as the invisible force that keeps salespeople from working their way up from the linoleum floors of midlevel management to the mahogany floors of the C-suite. Your salespeople may not show that fear, but you can still see its symptoms in how often your salespeople avoid having those conversations, or require your leadership to step in and save the call.

In short, your salespeople have a fear of heights. They’re afraid because it’s not a conversation that they have often. It’s an unnatural dialogue that pushes them too far outside of their comfort zones.

There’s only one way to overcome this fear, and that is to confront it. You need to give your salespeople opportunities to go toe-to-toe with a CXO – someone who has spent a career on the other side of the desk, at the top of the building, responsible for making the types of investment decisions you’re looking to win.

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This is in stark contrast to more traditional training models in this area, where you use a sales manager or a trainer who may be sold before but has never been in the executive chair, making those decisions and putting his or her career on the line to make a decision such as the one you’re asking them to make. They don’t have the buyer-side perspective.

You need to create opportunities to engage and practice having credible business conversations with a real-life executive in a safe environment, one where a quota, and your account relationship, isn’t at risk if they fumble.

Compelling
Most salespeople understand that it’s their job to take prospects from their current state, and get them interested in and investing in a future state – and they must help bridge this gap by creating urgency and inspiring the desire to change.

Once you’ve achieved competent levels in financial and business acumen, and instilled the confidence in your salespeople to engage with CXOs and senior-level executive buyers, you still have to tell a story that’s both insightful and compelling enough to get these executives to want to make that change and choose you. Specifically, you’re going to need to demonstrate how the value of your solution solves a validated customer business need.

Too many organizations default to the story you’ve spent the most time and money equipping your salespeople to tell – your “unique selling proposition” story. This is the story where you talk all about your favorite features and benefits and the value of your products. But this information simply isn’t motivating enough to drive executives to do something different. In fact, it’s probably the main reason that, across industries, 60 percent of deals sold this way are ending up lost to “no decision.”

What we have seen motivate executives is a legitimate, well-documented business case that speaks to the financial impact and business outcomes they are looking to attain. You need to equip your salespeople with a repeatable, effective approach to structuring your story and pitching it in a way that moves away from product-oriented selling propositions and into the world of financial and business impact modeling. Another organization, this time a Silicon Valley-based company, generated a 92 percent improvement in its close rates after changing its messaging to demonstrate the business impact and outcomes of an investment in its solution instead of its traditional value proposition approach.

Are You There Yet?
To sell higher and help your reps bridge the business acumen gap, you must enable them to be competent, confident, and compelling so they rise to the occasion and close more deals.
Avoid These 3 Mistakes for a Successful B2B Product Launch

It’s a tough market out there. You’re probably all too familiar with the stat that 55 to 80 percent of new products flop, depending on how generously you’re willing to define success.

Additionally, according to the CSO Insights 2014 Sales Performance Optimization Study, nearly half of B2B sales leaders feel that their teams “need improvement” in effectively introducing new products to the market.

So how can you overcome this “failure to launch” phenomenon? It comes down to avoiding three key product launch mistakes:

1. Your launch shouldn’t be synonymous with product training. You need to provide the right selling stories.

The bulk of most B2B product kickoffs and training focus too much on precisely the wrong information: all the cool, dazzling new features. You treat your launches like they are product training, but product knowledge won’t drive decisions. Before your salespeople earn the right to talk about your cool new solution, they must first be able to give your customers a reason to think about changing the way they are doing things today.

**Alternative:** Launch your product to your salespeople with the same message you expect them to deliver to your customers. First, tell them a powerful story that helps them see and show customers which business objectives are at risk if they stick with the status quo and what unforeseen or undervalued challenges in their environment are threatening their desired outcomes. In other words, first give them a why-change story.

Once you’ve convinced customers of the urgency to move from the status quo, your salespeople have earned the right to prove why you are the best alternative. Then you need to provide a follow-up story that speaks specifically to the why-you story, depicting how you solve the problems you just raised in a unique or advantageous way.

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2. Your launch shouldn’t send salespeople on an archaeological dig to find the right selling tools. You need to embed them in the way they work.

Most marketing organizations now set up extensive Web portals and microsites to support their new product launches. But here’s the problem: Most salespeople won’t search out those sites after the event, and if they do get there, they are often overwhelmed by the amount of content and limited amount of context for how to use it. This is a prescription for low adoption of your marketing tools, fading momentum for your new product, and poor first-year sales results.

**Alternative:** Stop trying to drag your salespeople to your portal or microsite. Instead, push the new story to them in engaging chunks of content and best-practice delivery examples. Make sure it works the way they work by serving up this information on their mobile devices. Furthermore, don’t rely on just one content push. Instead, provide compelling, fun, and educational reinforcement videos on key storytelling skills and examples for several weeks to keep your launch top of mind.

3. Your launch shouldn’t neglect first-line managers. You need to help them coach their teams in a way that adds value for all parties.

Many B2B marketers focus their efforts on outbound launch communications (to drive customer awareness and leads) as well as tools to help the sales team sell the new product. They treat sales managers as part of the sales team, expecting them to figure out how to support the new product after the initial launch. Unfortunately, managers are often busier and more distracted than their sales teams. Your product launch is just another (new) item on their “to-do” lists, one that probably won’t make it to the top. At the same time, your sales managers are your first line of defense in ensuring the adoption and consistent delivery of your new message. You can’t afford to overlook them.

**Alternative:** Provide coaching resources specifically targeted at your managers to make it easy for them to host a local “stand and present” event to practice and reinforce your new product messaging. Help them facilitate opportunities for their team to try on your new message in front of the internal team for the first time, instead of your customers, by creating event agendas and training content they can administer in team meetings.

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**Your company invests too much time and money in developing your new products to risk a weak launch to your sales team. You owe it to yourself to do it right.**