



Surviving In The Age Of Amazon

Clients have access to more information than ever. So, what is the sales rep bringing to the relationship?

By Jim Peduto

The internet has changed the role of salespeople. Customers have moved beyond the skill set of all but elite sellers. The sales force of five years ago simply does not have the skills to survive in an age of digitally enabled buyers. It's not that successful salespeople have become "bad" at selling, but their skills have atrophied. Survival requires salespeople to think differently about their customers and have vastly better skills than ever before.

Knowledgeworx recently published a white paper that analyzed the perfect storm of forces that has fundamentally changed the relationship between salespeople and their customers. You can download it at www.knowledgeworx.com.

This article discusses the first of the white paper's five trends, "The Amazon Effect," and outlines specific steps that manufacturers and distributors need to take to survive in the age of Amazon.

The Amazon Effect is the impact that online marketplaces have on business-to-business (B2B) sales. Modern buyers have access to more information than ever. In just a few clicks, they can access product information, technical specifications, demonstrations, testimonials,

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training and pricing — information that was traditionally provided by a salesperson. The salesperson that still relies on those activities to “add value” is redundant at best and irrelevant at worst.

The fact that the modern buyer increasingly prefers to research and move through a large portion of the buying decision without a salesperson is a clear signal that the salesperson’s role has dramatically changed.

Modern buyers are segregating sales forces into one of two groups:

- Sellers that sell on product and price
- Trusted business advisors

The prospects for the two groups of sellers and the companies that they work for are very different. The research shows that buyers are willing to pay a premium for a better buying experience. At the same time, there is very little tolerance for “product jockeys.”

Rarely does a company have a clear price or product advantage. There is also increasing parity in “value-added” services. Buyers tell us that differentiation is no longer based on price, product or service. The seller makes all the difference. To be successful, salespeople must differentiate themselves through a truly consultative sales process built around a thorough understanding of their customer’s business.

Successful salespeople ask lots of great and challenging questions. They also have strong sales DNA that supports a consultative approach. As a result, they can dive into broad business issues and propose solutions that impact their prospect’s business in a way that the prospect has not thought about before. The role of a trusted business advisor has almost nothing to do with product. It is all about collaboration, insight and business outcomes.


Salespeople must become experts at understanding their customers’ concerns by developing intimate knowledge of their prospects’ business issues in a way that allows them to create immediate and measurable value. They must provide value that transcends the department and impacts the entire organization.

A lot of work needs to be done. Study upon study shows the disconnect between buyers and sellers. One study found that “only 36 percent of B2B executives believe that salespeople understand their business problems and offer clear solutions for them.”

Survival requires changing the focus from your product to the customer’s business — specifically, the business outcomes. We hear

the refrain, “Our salespeople are consultative.” The truth is that they are not. We know that because our evaluations of more than 1.6 million salespeople tell us that fewer than 1 in 10 salespeople have sufficient consultative selling skills to survive.

The good news is that the skills can be

measured and improved with training. The starting point is to benchmark your sales team and assess their ability to successfully sell consultatively to a modern buyer. Once you know that, then you can build training to fill the gaps and skill-up your team. 

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