



Sales and Marketing Evolves As Buyer Behavior Changes

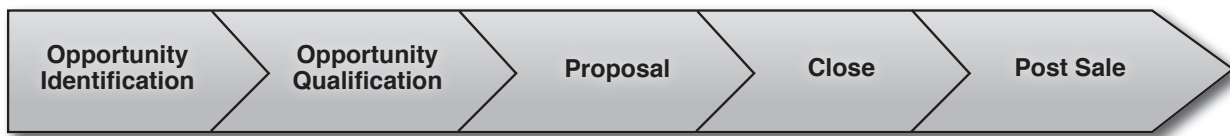
By Scott Gillum

Over the last 25 years, the sales process has become less of an art and more of a science. With the advent of sophisticated cloud-based CRM and marketing automation tools, sales managers and reps have more insight into the sales process. But that wasn't always the case.

When I first got into sales in the mid-1980s the process was very simple: Make as many sales calls as possible in a day to generate as many leads and closes as possible. You were on your own, and a flip chart usually kept track of your progress against the quota.

As time progressed, the sales process became better defined, as well as the tasks within each step. Sales began to align tools and content that was thought to be most effective at each stage of the process. Typically, that process came down to 5-7 steps, which generally cover the areas in the diagram below:

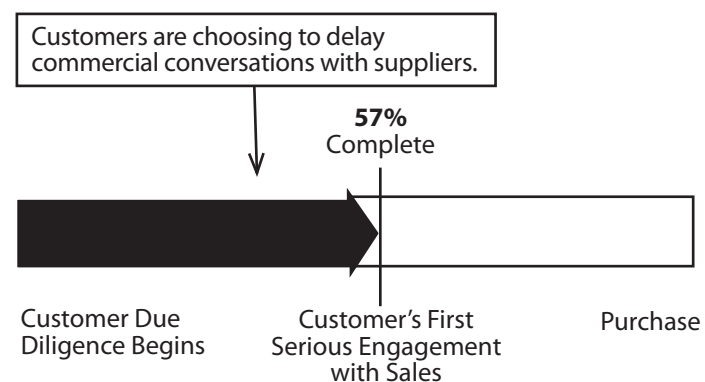
With the addition of more sophisticated tools to support the process, sales organizations felt more in control—or at least they created that perception. This inside-out myopic perspective left sales with the feeling that they controlled all the information related to products, competitors and pricing.



But research from Google and CEB, titled “The Digital Evolution in B2B Marketing” provides new insight into buyer behavior and challenges conventional wisdom. According to the study, customers reported that they considered themselves nearly 60% through the sales process before engaging a sales rep, regardless of price point. More accurately, this finding meant that 57% of the sales process just disappeared.

Due to greater availability and access to information and influencers, buyers are now comfortable going further into their own “purchase process” before contacting a vendor’s sales rep.

Figure 1: Degree of Progress Through the Purchase Process Before Engaging Sales Customer Average



Source: *Digital Evolution in B2B Marketing*, Google and CEB



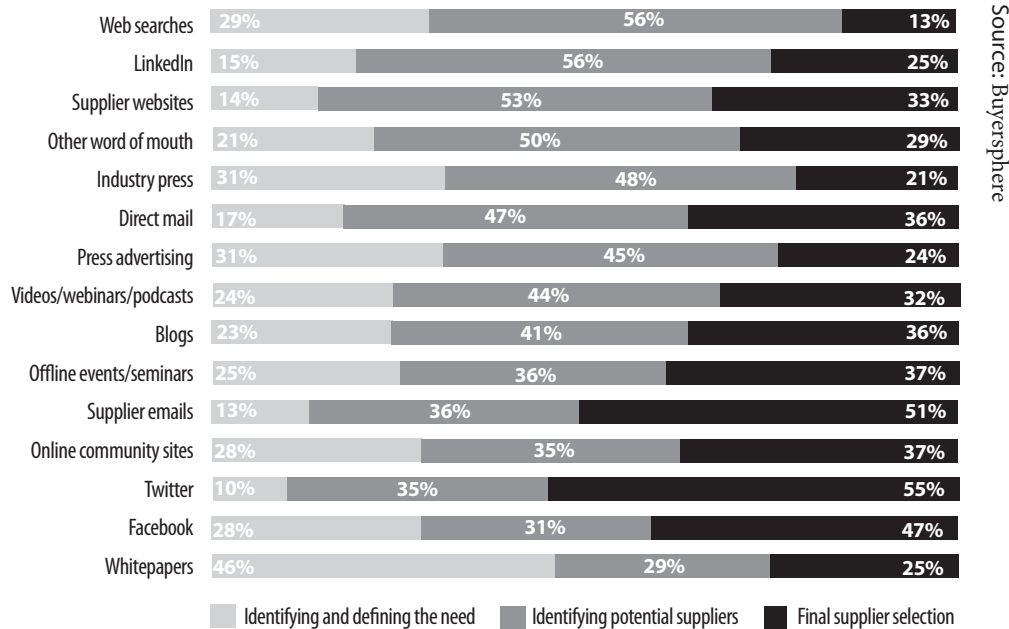
What are buyers doing if they're not talking to sales? They are surfing corporate websites to identify and qualify vendors, instead of the sales forces qualifying them. They are engaging peers in social media to learn more about their needs, potential solutions and providers. And they are reading, listening to and watching free digital content that is available to them at the click of a mouse. No longer is the sales force the sole source of information.

Research from Buyersphere's Report on B2B buyer behavior shows that buyers use multiple

sources, not just reps, for information at all stages of the buying process. Generation Y buyers lean heavily on social media for information, while other generations value corporate websites highest.

Perhaps even more interesting, when asked to define the most powerful source of information, word of mouth (WOM), Gen Y buyers mention social media first, then in-person or phone. All other buyers describe WOM as in-person or phone.

STAGE AT WHICH CHANNEL/SOURCE WAS MOST USEFUL



Source: Buyersphere

Various channels were ranked by respondents for the utility in three different stages of the buying process.

There are a number of additional insights to take from the research.

1. It is not all bad news: For products or services with low price points and/or margins, having customers direct themselves through the sales process can help reduce the cost of sales and/or create leverage for the sales force. In fact, in certain situations an organization will want to encourage this behavior. The research also found that some customers felt comfortable going through 70% of their due-diligence process before making contact.
2. Changing buying behavior: An old manager used to say that technology changes fastest, then con-

sumer buying behavior and eventually organizations. The 57% stated in the research makes for a good sound bite, but that level will probably vary greatly by customers, transaction, industry, etc. The point is that change is a constant—so how far ahead or behind are your sales and marketing efforts? Are you keeping pace? The second question is how would you know?

3. Content distribution: As the study notes, the sales force is still the most effective and important communication channel. When developing the content strategy, ensure that the best and/or most valuable content is not in the public do-



main—reserve it for the sales force.

4. Time to take social media seriously: With well-informed prospects, sales reps have to quickly learn what buyers know or perceive about the organization, products/services and competitors. Social media can help them better understand what is motivating buyers to take action, what buyers believe to be true and, perhaps most important, whom they believe.
5. Web 1.0 is still a priority: Before shifting your focus and investments to social media, make sure you have covered the basics first. Buyers still use searches to start their journey, and corporate websites are considered the most valuable source of content.

The Future

Business decision-makers will continue to drive their own purchase process deeper into the sales process. As a result, relevant content will continue to escalate in value, especially content related to consideration and purchase drivers, and the business application of the product or service.

This content will need to be relevant to the audience's role and/or situation. It will need to be consistent, easily digestible and enlightening, and in certain cases entertaining. As a result, start planning to package the content in short videos and make it modular in design so that buyers can share it with others.

Social media and monitoring has helped many marketing organizations understand this trend and to make the transition from being content “dictators” to information “facilitators.” For sales organizations, this research may be an epiphany. No longer can they be successful focusing solely on inwardly directed processes intended for reporting and planning purposes.

With increasingly knowledgeable buyers waiting longer to engage, sales has to transition from being

Checklist: How to Get Content Right

1. Create an editorial calendar to ensure a consistent flow.
2. Make it insightful and actionable.
3. Hire staff or vendors/freelancers to deliver on time.
4. Keep it short and add visual elements.
5. Write in the voice of the customer.

a “product pusher” following a process, to an insight “provider” adding value to the buyer's business. As the study states, sales must deliver “pointed insights and evidence that seek to challenge an entrenched point of view among potential customers.”

Finally, it is time to recognize that we're not in control—and perhaps we never were. Buyers are driving the process, and we need to align to their needs. As a mentor once told me, “technology changes, buyers adapt and companies struggle to catch up.” The traditional sales process is now obsolete, so it is now time to follow the buyers' journey. **PRN**

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