

ALIGNING SALES AND MARKETING FOR MAXIMUM EFFECTIVENESS

Chris Schermer, Schermer Kuehl

Congratulations, your marketing budget has been increased by 8% over last year. You've got two new products launching later this fall, and the economy is better than it's been in years. But you're also going to be held personally responsible for the company hitting its revenue growth goal of 15% this year.

Yikes! You set to work devising a new brand strategy. You plan the product launches months in advance. You tell the agency it's do-or-die time. But these are just puzzle pieces. Unless you bridge the gap between Marketing and Sales, your efforts are wasted.

As we've discovered, most B2B companies struggle to bridge this gap. At a recent B2B Marketing Roundtable hosted by Schermer Kuehl, seven companies got together to discuss the issue of aligning Sales and Marketing for maximum effectiveness. While there were as many questions as answers, these senior marketing professionals certainly had many perspectives and experiences to share with one another. ** Here are some challenges and insights identified at the Roundtable.

Challenges

All of the marketing pros admitted that there was some type of gap between their Marketing and Sales organizations, either figuratively or literally. In some cases, the gap was physical; sales people were not located in the same location as the marketing department, either because they worked remotely or possibly because the company has a dealer channel. In other cases, the gap was figurative, but no less a problem. Some of these companies admitted that they had no formal systems of communication or education, and that sales oftentimes operated on their own agenda. You can imagine what happens in this scenario. Picture Marketing trying to steer the wagon when the Sales horses are all pulling in different directions. The wagon ends up going nowhere.

Other significant factors that affect sales and marketing alignment mentioned during the roundtable included:

- Formalized Communications programs between Sales and Marketing
- Marketing-led Training programs for sales
- No formalized Feedback programs from Sales to Marketing
- Technology
- Measurement (of Marketing ROI)
- Endorsement from Executives
- Commitment from Sales to marketing programs

Perhaps it's the same at your company? Despite having good products, a great marketing strategy and stellar sales people, the gap in alignment of those elements leaves revenues flat.

Insights

Let's look at a few of the critical insights identified by the Roundtable participants.

Executive Vision

Often, a company's brand is driven by its marketing department. This group sees the market conditions, understands the customer, and looks at itself as the keeper of the brand. But without endorsement from senior executives, the resulting marketing efforts many times stall or fall below expectations. Branding can give a company a big advantage over competition, but it's not realized without consistent support and execution. This starts at the top and drives down in an organization, beginning with Executive Vision. If your senior leaders don't have a vision for your brand, help them define one.

Defining Marketing Strategies

From there, marketers need to grasp that vision and turn it into marketing strategies. Most sales people think they know more about the customer than you do. They may be right, but that doesn't mean that they should deviate from the course with personal interpretations of branding or creating their own messaging. It is Marketing's role to set branding and marketing strategies that are in line with Executive Vision and that support business objectives. Sales is responsible for executing those strategies.

Education and Communication

Two more contributors to Sales and Marketing alignment were communications and education. Half of the participants said that communication with sales wasn't a problem. They knew what Marketing was planning, and knew when and how programs were to be executed. They simply didn't understand or care. Education is required to engage the sales force, to help build their understanding and commitment. One B2B marketer at the Roundtable views her role in marketing to not only arm the salespeople with solid marketing and selling tools, but to train and educate them on how to sell. So selling and marketing are very closely tied. In regards to business objectives, one cannot be successful without the other.

One Roundtable participant recalled a recent Brand Initiative in which Executive Vision was defined, sales and employee input were solicited, strategy was devised by marketing, and formal brand and messaging training was held for all senior leaders and sales personnel. On top of that, execs have committed budget to ongoing brand training, communications and research for its employees. The engagement of the workforce in the past six months is unbelievable, as people now understand rationally what the organization is trying to achieve, as well as being emotionally connected to the vision.

Feedback

Sales has something that most marketers don't: access to customers. They are in the "trenches" every day, pitching your messaging, using your collateral, and hopefully, trying to sell the brand. You've got to solicit their feedback in order to keep them engaged. Think of your relationship with Sales as a game of catch. You can just throw a ball at them and walk away, or, you can't catch what they throw back at you. Formal feedback is crucial for efficient and evolving marketing programs. Some of the Roundtable participants reported holding quarterly Sales and Marketing meetings, in addition to scheduled communications and formal feedback programs.

Measurement

Another of the major challenges for today's marketing manager is that marketing activities need to relate to numbers. Traditionally, marketing didn't really have to map numbers and sales, just inquiries and leads. Measuring metrics, let alone identifying them in the first place, is difficult.

Alignment of the sales and marketing departments at the VP level is mandatory to track and measure results through the lead generation and sales process. Without those two VPs working together (or

being combined under one person), there is no hope for end-to-end tracking and measurement. Technology can also play a part in helping to measure marketing and sales alignment. Some participants reported that their companies had invested thousands in custom software applications. These apps would capture leads, disperse them to the appropriate sales channel, and track them through the sales funnel. Some of the off-the-shelf Sales or CRM packages mentioned included Goldmine, ACT and SAP.

Summary

Aligning Sales and Marketing for maximum effectiveness starts at the top, but doesn't end there. You need to fully enable and engage the Marketing and Sales organizations before, during and after major marketing initiatives. From our experience, and the insights of the B2B Marketing Roundtable participants, we've developed an Alignment Model to help guide you in your efforts to align sales and marketing.



Chris Schermer is President at Schermer Kuehl, a marketing communications agency specializing in Driving Brand Demand for business-to-business companies. Contact him at chris.schermer@skmarketing.com.

** Companies at the February B2B Marketing Roundtable included: Fargo Electronics, HB Fuller, GE Security Group, 3M / HighJump Software, OnApproach Consulting, Minco, and Schermer Kuehl.