

Nurturing–The Secret to Doubling Your Sales Conversion Rate

By Michael J. Webb

The root cause of most sales process problems is the failure to understand the customer's point of view. It is every seller's dream to stumble on a "market tornado" where virtually everyone in the market is qualified and ready to buy today, and there is no need to try to understand anything about them.

Unfortunately, as the economy becomes more complex, those conditions are increasingly rare. In most markets (especially B2B), the "Customer's Journey" can be complex and nuanced. Understanding it is essential for finding the right prospects, helping them recognize their problem, evaluating alternatives, and so forth.

The failure to understand the customer's perspective leads to two basic selling problems. The first is attempting to get prospects to do things they are not ready to do. The second is the lack of a nurturing cycle for prospects that are not ready to buy now.

Helping Prospects Get Ready to Buy

If someone has not recognized a need for what you sell, telling them about your product won't usually help you (duh!). The sales process must begin on the prospect's terms: when they recognize a need.

Here are three examples of people who are about to become prospects for some salesperson:

- Electronics design engineer
You need a microwave component for a small electronic system you are designing. The system needs to withstand a wide range of temperatures. You are not an expert in microwave devices, but you can read industry sources and follow

the design parameters easily enough, so you order some components and have the prototype developed.

You think everything is going along fine, until failures on the prototype are traced to mysterious cracking on the mounting joints for the microwave component. At this point, you have a problem: you have to figure out the cause of the cracks and fix it while staying on budget for the project overall.

You have become a prospect for electronic design engineering services to troubleshoot the application and select the right components and surface-mounting technology.

- Respiratory therapy department manager

Increasing amounts of your budget are being spent renting respirators (for patients unable to breathe on their own) from a medical supply house because your hospital's aging machines are becoming unreliable. You resolve to put a proposal together for new machines.

You think you are doing well until the hospital administration selects the MRI lab's proposal for new equipment instead of yours (MRIs generate new patient revenue, respirators don't). Your problem now is how to endure another year of suboptimal equipment while figuring out how to persuade the administration to approve your proposal.

You have become a prospect for assistance in justifying, selecting, and acquiring new respiratory ventilators.

- IT project manager

Your department develops systems for an international banking firm. Your funding comes from intra-company billings that require documentation for the time your personnel have spent. Although timesheets are part of their job, your

people don't like them and it does not get the attention it needs. Making sense of inconsistent timesheets faxed or e-mailed from multiple geographies and time zones is taking up too much of your time.

You realize you have a serious problem when a cranky division vice president alleges over-billing and refuses to approve a payment for the services he received.

You have become a prospect for specially configured timesheet data collection software and training for your staff.

There are several things to notice about each of these cases. For one, you are probably not aware that you have become a prospect. It might surprise (and even delight you) to learn that there is a salesperson somewhere who knows how to help.

For another, in each case a product won't solve your problem. The problem requires the application of some kind of services to the product in order to fit your context.

In addition, you won't be ready to recommend that your company spend any money until you have found someone you can trust who knows how to solve your problem. The seller who wins your business will have focused on understanding your problem and earning your trust.

Finally, the need and decision to act come from the customer, and not from the seller. Once you have decided whom to deal with and what to purchase, you might be somewhat interested in a discount or package deal, but not until then. Sellers who focus on these limit themselves to transactional marketplaces where discounts and deals are the only differentiation.

The Need for Nurturing

There are usually many reasons prospects are not ready to move from one stage of their Customer's Journey to the next. For one thing, they have many problems to deal with at any given time. It can be difficult for them to decide which problems to focus on first.

For another, their problems are often complex and interrelated. They may require time to study their situation and decide what is causing the problems they are experiencing. In addition, their situation changes over time. New priorities can distract them. From their perspective, the solutions to their problems may not be apparent or believable.

Even if they have figured out their problems and potential solutions, they may face the challenge of having to persuade others within their organization. Or, they may face the challenge of convincing a decision maker who does not see the problem their way.

Overcoming obstacles like these is a challenge under the best of circumstances. People need repeated encouragement to help them overcome these types of inertia.

When you look at it this way, it seems obvious that the seller's job is largely nurturing such relationships. The seller must continuously educate prospects on the value of their offers, make it easy for them to take baby steps in the right direction, reduce the prospect's risk (by increasing their trust), and help them overcome organizational inertia.

The question for the seller becomes how to provide the relationship nurturing so it is most effective. Clearly, leaving the task up to salespeople alone might make it a hit-or-miss affair. While salespeople can play an important role, the nurturing process is important enough to warrant the attention of the team to make sure it gets done as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Types of Nurturing Programs

Nurturing programs can serve several important purposes. In the cases above, nurturing communications could help prospects move through the stages of their problem-solving journeys (in other words, moving the sale along). The marketing department could

produce articles, whitepapers, case examples, and other materials of interest to prospects in various stages of their journey. These could be delivered to prospects via e-mail or direct mail nurturing programs (as part of the regular sales process) or be used by salespeople as sales aids as they saw fit.

In addition, there are cases where nurturing should be used to create obstacles for your customers. Here is an example:

The western regional sales manager in a small but growing company had too many prospects asking for his time. A new prospect in Anchorage, Alaska, had asked him to visit. He had demonstrations to conduct in Phoenix and Los Angeles. Proposals were due in Sacramento and Denver. He physically couldn't be in that many places in the time available.

We designed an initial information package for his new prospects, which included a brochure set, company background, a DVD demonstration of the product, and several case history examples. It also included a series of e-mails sent automatically over a 3-week period informing the prospect about how their offers had helped other companies. The last e-mail in the series asked them to complete a simple application questionnaire on a website in exchange for the opportunity to meet with one of the company's sales consultants.

The idea was if they were really interested, they would spend the time to complete that questionnaire. If they did so, and if the answers were the right ones, it was evidence that they were a qualified prospect. They would be worth prioritizing over other demands on the regional manager's time. This became the standard way to respond to initial inquiries, and it accounted for a substantial increase in sales productivity.

Some companies use permission-based newsletters as nurturing vehicles. Others use call center agents or account managers to keep in touch with their prospects over time.

Information products and membership subscriptions are valuable vehicles to nurture relationships with potential prospects. Campaign or lead management software are often used to help manage the mechanics of keeping track of opt-ins, fulfilling the offers, forwarding leads to salespeople, and reporting on results.

Whatever the vehicles you use, there are several things to keep in mind when designing these communications.

Principles of Designing Nurturing Process

The principles of designing a nurturing program are essentially the same as those for designing a sales process:

- Focus on the prospect's problem and how to solve it, not on your product.
- Make their problem/situation easier by providing helpful information, examples, and problem-solving guidelines.
- Be clear on what stage of their journey they are in and what your goal is for the communication.
- Always, always offer a call to action, to move them to the next stage of their journey.
- If you are not sure what kind of help they need or want, the best thing you can do is to ask them! Find ways to talk to prospects so you can learn what they need.

Communications that nurture relationships with prospects are definitely among the most important ones in the entire sales process. The return on investment for developing and implementing these types of programs can be extremely high. In addition to helping customers solve real problems, you are also making the process more consistent, which heightens the value of their experience with your company.

Biography of Michael J. Webb, President, Sales Performance Consultants, Inc.

Michael J. Webb is the founder of Sales Performance Consultants, a firm devoted to helping senior executives who need to make their sales funnel flow faster. Michael delivered the keynote address to the first two conferences ever held on applying Six Sigma to marketing and sales. He has helped companies such as MAQUET, Replicon, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Electro Technick Industries, and many others to find more of the right customers at higher margins and lower costs by improving their sales and marketing processes. Michael is the author of “*Sales and Marketing the Six Sigma Way*” (Kaplan, 2006) and numerous articles.