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A New Approach to Marketing and Sales Collaboration

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The lack of alignment between marketing and sales in the technology industry is nothing new. Different goals, different timelines, different cultures, and not enough appreciation of how both sides contribute to the business have long undercut a truly integrated approach to sustainable growth.

Although both sides have often bemoaned the "marketing is from Mars, sales is from Venus" disconnect, the traditional approach to closing the gap reflects an outdated view of marketing and sales priorities. If companies are anxious to get the two functions working together more effectively, they need to take a fresh look at both the problem and the solution.

The typical approach to marketing-sales alignment emphasizes getting marketing closer to sales through initiatives such as tighter alignment of marketing activities with the sales cycle, better coordination around demand generation and lead management, and allowing sales to have more input into marketing programs and materials. These types of initiatives certainly can be useful, but they risk reinforcing the standard industry view that marketing is ultimately the junior partner of sales and that the alignment problem is mainly one of marketers straying too far from the daily and quarterly demands of the sales force.

The reality is that dramatic shifts in the nature of customers, competitors, offerings, and market influencers are placing new demands on both marketing and sales organizations, and both sides must change if they are to succeed. Successful alignment today is not about marketing being a better junior partner; it's about greater collaboration on shared priorities within a much more complex customer environment.

For starters, both marketing and sales must provide substantial input to help companies address some of their most important questions, including:

- Which market segments provide the greatest opportunities?
- Which offering areas deserve priority investment?
- Which partners can best contribute to near- and longer-term growth?
- How can we best strengthen relationships with key clients and key executives?

Second, today's longer and more elaborate purchase processes means that marketing can no longer focus just on brand and lead generation and then rely on sales to do the rest; neither can the sales folks simply take leads (even the most qualified ones) and bring them to a close on their own. Instead, marketing needs to not only support sales through the cycle but to actively develop programs and campaigns that engage customers, deepen conversations, and enhance relationships every step of the way.

Finally, the ever-faster rate of change in the marketplace puts greater stress on both sides, not only to "align" programs and strategies in some initial planning phase, but to continuously adjust them in synch to ensure ongoing coordination as company priorities adapt to new challenges and opportunities.

As the pressure to perform continues to mount on both marketing and sales, the benefits of greater collaboration are tantalizingly clear:

- Improved market and segment focus
- More compelling offerings
- Shorter and less expensive sales cycles
- More satisfied and loyal customers

If the two sides are indeed to collaborate more effectively, they must focus on the practical challenges of working together on some the newer priorities for marketplace success. Four of these newer priorities are:

- **Account-based marketing (ABM).** As companies look to generate more business from their key accounts, ABM is gaining attention as a critical initiative. By definition, developing marketing programs for individual key accounts requires intensive collaboration between marketers and sales account teams. Although the main goals for ABM are typically to improve revenue, profit, positioning, and/or relationships within the accounts, the side benefits of bringing sales and marketing together in a priority area for the business are substantial as well.
- **Reference management.** Skeptical buyers, analysts, journalists, and others continue to elevate their demands for provider proof. Not surprisingly, reference programs have moved to the forefront in recent years as critical support systems for both marketing and sales. Making them robust and flexible enough to enable the right reference at the right time in the right format, however, requires much greater marketing and sales collaboration than has usually been the case.
- **Executive relationship development.** Technology and services firms today all see the need to strengthen relationships with senior executives to win larger deals and improve client loyalty. Meanwhile, they also need their clients to help them understand new opportunities, develop new solutions, and minimize marketplace mistakes. Systematically improving the quality and quantity of executive relationships requires deep and sustained collaboration between marketing and sales.
- **Consultative and solutions sales training.** As companies focus more on upgrading the ability of their sales forces to sell higher-value solutions to more senior business buyers, they are bumping into the limits of traditional sales training. Marketing organizations potentially have a major role to play in complementing the generic skills development with the specific market, competitive, and business insight necessary to support effective solutions selling.

Doubtless there are other initiatives that can help close the gap. Simply putting marketing and sales people in each others' shoes more often—for example, through joint planning, job rotations, or even more physical colocation—can be a huge help. Shared metrics and accountability is another critical area. But the four initiatives discussed here have two critical qualities that recommend them highly. First, they are all (or should be) practical corporate-level priorities for success that can only work with greater marketing-sales collaboration. Second, they each have the added advantage of being able to generate near-term sales results while strengthening the foundation for longer-term sustainable growth.

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