

Stop Pushing Products and Start Building Relationships

CRM is not the silver bullet. Contracts are not going to happen simply by installing new CRM technology. A corresponding movement from a transaction mentality to the underlying CRM principle of focusing on the long-term relationship is required. What does this mean for developers and manufacturers seeking to successfully penetrate the U.S. marketplace? Stop pushing products and start building relationships.

The Consumer's Perspective

Take a look from your client's perspective. Brand confusion-the convergence in products and services has produced new players, company names, and products. Everybody is now playing in everybody else's backyard. Add the media's frequent coverage on your market sector and increased advertising dollars being spent targeting "the confused client." Now, throw in the fact that there is widespread incoherence around defining the term "Return on Investment". At its best, this situation is overwhelming to potential and current clients, and maybe even your employees. At its worst, people are sticking their heads in the sand and saying, "leave me alone!"

Making the sale has always been a function of information and relationship. Being in the technology sales business means you are in the personal education business. And it's not nearly as sexy as the ad agencies make it seem. No matter how many sailboats, moonlight beaches, or mansions an advertising agency plasters in print and on the airways, selling new technology products makes prospects and clients deal with some uncomfortable issues. It is no wonder that succeeding to "close the deal" demands a set of tools that moves far beyond the info dump and abundance of brochures that dominate your industry.

The Manufacturer's Perspective

Taking a look from the firms' perspective, corporate identities are still being created and there is more competition. Mergers and acquisitions have been in full throttle. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, Israeli firms lag far behind many of their foreign counterparts in data mining, making it almost impossible to build a single integrated view of their customers.

On either side of the spectrum, change is the dominant theme. So given the current state of affairs, how do you execute a CRM strategy that promotes improved sales? How can you increase the chances that your CRM strategy will stick? Here are some of the best conditions for selling:

- When the sales force has complete access to a particular customer's needs or future needs.
- When the sales force knows and understands the long-term strategy in your firm.
- When the sales staff, partners, and your R&D teams work together to deliver what is promised.
- When management agrees on how to lead the transformation necessary to change the sales culture and insure all staff are delivering the same corporate message.

The Softer Side of CRM

All of the above conditions require more than technological supremacy and product understanding to execute. They require the softer side of the CRM equation: relationship building with customers, prospects, management, colleagues, other company departments, partners, and the R&D team. If you want to solve the business challenge of acquiring new and long-term clients, you'll need to:

- Build trust. The core of any social or economic relationship is trust. For the marketing staff, that might require working with clients in new ways. For management and the R&D staff, that might include building bridges with other departments or field staff.
- Develop a network of helpful relationships that will act as "oil" for the CRM machine. Research shows that the more helpful relationships there are, the more information is willingly shared. For your marketing people, that might mean prospecting in new ways. For the business development team, it might mean articulating and agreeing on a practical policy of real-time knowledge and information sharing.

It's a Process

Relationship building is a process of trust building. It is also an iterative process. It is a process of layering...the relationship starts at arm's length, then grows more intimate as the trust builds, passing little tests along the way. This applies to all relationships-with customers, employees, peers, partners, and even competitors. Your internal experts in technology, marketing, corporate identity, operations, and sales must grow to learn how to be experts in the business of relationship building. In today's environment, CRM is screaming for experts on relationship building.

Managing customer relationships can only happen after they've been properly built. One word of caution for Hi-Tech marketing teams, as they march forward to the CRM tune: don't worry about selling the features and benefits of your products. You're already good at that. Start focusing on how you can build relationships with your customers and prospects in new and different ways that will allow for enhanced and ongoing sales. Remember the aphorism: A sure sign of insanity is doing the same old thing while expecting new and different results.