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Business Leaders Get It.

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Why the best idea is always to work backward

Business people love ideas, new and old. We collect them and find great joy in finding new places to transplant them. We think what worked so well over there ought to work great here. But we're often completely wrong.

I see it in marketing all the time. I confess that I have even occasionally fallen in love with an idea that just won't work. After I take the time to think it through, I realize it's doomed.

What do I mean by think it through? I mean that you need to think through every marketing idea all the way through to the sale. And your best ideas start at the end, with how the product is sold.

Here's why: Your sales process and your sales team are unique. I know they are, because your sales team is made up of people. And people created your sales processes. No two people think exactly alike. So you need to know how your sales team works and what they think before you create your marketing program. It's the difference between success and abject failure.

It's never a good idea to buck the (sales) system.

An insurance company's sales team had been successfully closing leads brought in by the marketing department year in and year out, until a new marketing director came in. He took a look at the lead generation letter and knew immediately why it wasn't really working. He was absolutely certain he had a better plan that would bring in far more leads for the team. In fact, he would bet — and he never bet except on a sure thing — that he could double the response rate they'd been getting.

He was right. And he was flat wrong.

He actually brought in four times the number of leads with his next mailing. He set up a campaign-specific Web site that captured the names, addresses and e-mails for

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Spyro Kourtis



all the leads. It was a thing of beauty, a real machine. Two months later he was fired because no one who had responded had bought a thing.

Why? The sales team wasn't prepared to handle the type of leads that came in. The people who responded to the letter were happy with the offer of a free key

ring for signing up on the nice Web site. But they had no intention of buying insurance.

Here's my confession. A couple of years ago, I almost repeated that man's mistake.

A client came to us with a marketing problem they described as "response rates for our lead-generation program are flat." Or maybe I just heard it that way. Regardless, I had a fantastic idea.

It had worked beautifully for another client. I knew I could increase my new client's response rate by initially sending out a survey package, getting a large number of people to respond, and then following up with telemarketing. I was in love with that idea.

Truthfully, I probably could have gotten bigger numbers on the front end. But as I looked at their previous marketing materials, I soon realized their sales team wasn't really handling leads at all. They were getting calls from people who said something like, "This price looks great. I'm ready to buy."

If I'd stuck with my original idea, the sales team would have asked for my head. And they would have been right. No one who responded would have been ready to buy anything.

The more you tell, the less you sell.

On the other hand, I've worked with clients who are only too happy to slow the lead flow to practically zero by talking about price or plans or commitments far too early in the process.

If you spill all the detailed information in the first communication with prospects, you will probably just frighten them off — or get a big yawn. They're not ready to look at the specs of your behemoth financial software system. They don't want to hear that it will cost their company \$2.3 million and what the installation process is. Not yet. It's too much information. They just want to know whether you think you have an answer for their particular business problem.

Usually it's the product managers who want to drown prospects in the details. Every feature is equally important in their minds. Better to draw them in with a little hope or salvation message. Once they've expressed an interest, you've opened a nice dialogue — but only if your sales team can handle this kind of process.

So take a good look at your sales team before you decide what your marketing strategy should be. In most cases, they're going to keep doing what they've been doing. You're the one who should accommodate their needs by planning your marketing strategy based on how they sell and working backward. Once you understand all the sales steps, create the communications that will support sales, not fight them.

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