

Customer Commitment and Marketing Communication Tools in the Sales

Process.

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Abstract

Companies aiming at increasing the efficiency of their sales departments equip their salespeople with a number of tools that motivate their customers to buy their products. However, the type of customer commitment to the sales process should be also taken into consideration in such a case and the applied instruments should be adjusted to customer needs in the most individualized way possible. Using the appropriate impact measures improves the message legibility and, by increasing the effectiveness of the presented argumentation, it raises the buyer's willingness to purchase products. Therefore, the ability to identify the type of customer commitment and use this knowledge in the communication process becomes one of the most essential skills of sales personnel.

Key words: selling, commitment, marketing communication, proactive sales

Effective selling is an essential activity of each business entity. It determines the existence of a company. Therefore, companies lay much stress on professional preparation of their sales teams and take a number of actions in order to support salespeople in fulfilment of their basic function. One of the most important tools supporting sales personnel is marketing communication, understood as a concept covering activities integrating and coordinating numerous communication channels of a company in order to provide a clear, consistent and convincing message to the customer concerning a given offer and the company itself. (Kotler, et al., 2002).

In that case, however, personal communication, which constitutes the basis of business contacts in the B2B market, cannot be ignored. Each transaction is conducted by people, notwithstanding the way they communicate with one another. If it is a face to face meeting, then both participants are influenced by a number of factors. Also in case of telephone, written, or online communication, there are always people behind it. It is people who make decisions, and that is why their commitment plays a crucial role.

Determinants of the sales process

The sales process is in fact a process of exchange between the parties concerned. Whether or not they reach an agreement depends on many factors. One of them is the type of customer making a purchase. During the sales process, a salesperson can encounter three different types of buyers, i.e. (Greenwald, 2001):

- 1) **the technical buyer** is a person who attaches great importance to technical properties and assesses them meticulously. For such type of customer not only measurable parameters are important, but also construction aspects, applied resources or service requirements. In relations with such type of customer, particular attention should be paid to professional technical preparation, remembering at the same time that he rather has an advisory function and does not decide about the purchase;

- 2) **the economic buyer** is a person who finally approves the purchase due to his prestige or position in the hierarchy. Usually, he takes into account the technical buyer's opinion, but he estimates the offer attractiveness from his own point of view. For him profits are important, thus he is more interested in prices and costs rather than in solving problems of the organisation;
- 3) **the end user** is a person representing real users of the product being purchased, i.e. those who are supposed to bring profits to the organization as a result of the purchase. Unfortunately, not all organizations invite end users to participate in the purchase process, which may result in their dislike of novelty. While meeting end users, a salesperson's key role is to focus on attributes of the offer and give them a practical aspect.

Another factor that is important in the course of sale is recognising the correlation between the purchase process and the sales process. By way of example, Miller (2003) understands it in the following way: the buyer tries to attain his goal going through the following stages: *initial interest, education, transfer of ownership, rationalize and last one decide*, while the seller has other tasks and his process looks like that: *initiate, educate, validate, justify and close*. It can be noticed that both processes are similar. Miller, however, emphasises a crucial role of the attitude assumed during the exchange as he argues that the party that leads the process is the winner. Thus, in order to be successful as a salesperson one should focus on leading the process.

In the course of the sales process a number of components become exchanged. Hutt and Speh (1997) identify basic components of the exchange process, namely: information, solving problems, negotiations, trust and friendship, products and services, and payments. Each of these elements plays its specific role, and jointly they decide about benefits derived by both parties from the exchange process. The efficiency and effects of the sales process are

also influenced by the degree of commitment of transaction participants, especially the commitment on the part of the customer.

Customer commitment

Commitment is one of relational effects of communication between both parties of the sales process, i.e. the seller and the buyer (Kwiatek, Leszczyński, Zieliński, 2009, p. 122). It is of particular importance during a business contact, where the interaction takes place not only during a face to face meeting, but also there are technical and technological relations of operational systems and numerous non-marketing functions, which is eventually reflected in the durability of relations with the buyer (Fanfara, 2004). In each of the aforementioned fields relations between the parties concerned are formed mainly through the communication process, and Kwiatek, Leszczyński, Zieliński (2009, p. 117) mention the following relational effects:

- **satisfaction**, understood as a function of meeting customer's expectations, and in particular, as an individual assessment of discrepancies between expectations and the obtained value;
- **trust**, it is reliability and a belief that the other party to the relation is acting in good will;
- **commitment** is a motivation-based process, i.e. it spurt the customer to action and directs his behaviour.

A question arises as to which of these effects has the greatest significance. If the time criterion is taken into consideration, definitely commitment is the most important factor. It results from the fact that satisfaction usually appears after a transaction has been accomplished, and thus it is an ex post facto effect. On the other hand, trust refers to the future as it means waiting for positive results of a relation, and in particular, a belief that the results will occur in the future (Kwiatek, Leszczyński, Zieliński 2009, p. 129). Commitment is

always revealed in contact and it is the amount of energy used by the customer for a given activity while buying a product (Furtak, 2003, p. 174).

Since commitment plays a crucial role, it is worth looking closer at the characteristics and types of this phenomenon. We can distinguish the following characteristics of commitment (Furtak, 2003, p. 174):

- **direction of commitment**, that is what energy is expended on, e.g. commitment to the process of product selection, commitment to the communication process, commitment to the process of acquiring information;
- **force of commitment**, i.e. determining the amount of expended energy during execution of a given process.

The characteristics of commitment allow to determine what is important to the customer and to what degree. It is essential in the sales process as it optimizes the bidder's reaction giving at the same time a big chance for success in a transaction.

Commitment, as a peculiar desire to maintain a valuable relation (Moorman, et al., 1994) can be twofold, namely: **affective** (related to such notions as affinity or friendship) and **calculative** (connected with perceived profitability of a relation) (Kwiatek, Leszczyński, Zieliński, 2009, p. 122). The first type of commitment, as Kwiatek, Leszczyński and Zieliński proved, is strongly connected with a sense of trust, while the other with the costs resulting from a change of supplier (p. 123). It means that in order to adapt in the sales process to the type of customer commitment it is important to select marketing communication tools appropriately.

Using marketing communication tools depending on the type of customer commitment

In order to induce the buyer to purchase products, the seller must make a communication effort. He has a broad spectrum of marketing communication tools in that field, including: advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, direct marketing and public

relations. While applying these tools, however, the seller should take the buyer's expectations into account.

In their research Kwiatek, Leszczyński and Zieliński determined communication behaviours that are preferred by customers depending on the type of their commitment (2009, pp. 124-128). In their opinion the most liked salespeople are those who:

- allow to check information about the supplier's company and its products from independent sources;
- submit information with convenient frequency at the time set beforehand;
- are not overpersuasive;
- pass on only those pieces of information that are expected by customers;

In that case one of the communication tools, namely direct marketing clearly holds an advantage over the other tools. On one hand, it enables to pass on information precisely and on time, even in an asynchronous way, while on the other, it allows to react immediately to any additional customer needs.

Taking calculative commitment into account, the researchers concluded that for customers it is worth cooperating with salespeople who:

- submit information no later than it was agreed upon;
- communicate with buyers as often as they expect;
- pass on only those pieces of information that are expected by customers;
- communicate with buyers only in the form of a dialogue.

Expectations determined in such a way imply in turn the necessity of a personal contact of the seller with his customers. It can be supposed in this case that because of a limited degree of trust in the supplier's representative, the seller should "keep an eye on him" during business talks. It seems that the only tool that may be considered in contacts with this type of customer, is the telephone, though it should not be used too often.

Conclusions

Selling is an essential activity of each business entity. Willingness to recognise and satisfy customer needs is the foundation of the concept of marketing, and when we add to it the formation of deep and durable bonds between the seller and the buyer, we will get the creed of partnership marketing. In that case, one of the most important effects of the relation is the buyer's commitment, which, depending on its type and intensity, affects the communication process.

In order to use the available marketing communication tools in an optimal way, ensuring the customer's satisfaction at the same time, the content, quality and form of submitted information should be adapted to the customer's perception. If the customer is ready to become emotionally involved in relations with the supplier, then it is profitable to apply the tools of direct marketing. If, on the other hand, the customer wants to have a broad range of control over the way, quality and form of contacts, the necessity of face-to-face meetings should be taken into account. In both cases it should be remembered that successful selling is also influenced by other factors and only an appropriate mix of all elements affecting purchase decisions can guarantee success.

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