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Get Your Sales Reps Branded

Walk down the hallway one morning and ask five of your sales reps what your company's brand stands for. Chances are you'll get five different answers - and chances are none of them will be entirely correct. That's because despite the money and effort companies spend communicating their brands to potential buyers, little is done to build the brand internally. As a result, there's often a disconnect between what a company promises to prospective customers and what the people at the point of sale are saying, says Robert Bradshaw, director of sales for Roslyn Heights, New York based Vuepoint, a leading training solutions provider for the sales and marketing channel (www.vuepoint.com). The disconnect, in turn, loses sales and breeds disillusioned clients.

Here's why. "We perceive promises through a company's branding. When I see an ad, I gain an expectation and that expectation is emotionalized," explains Bradshaw. "Armed with my feeling about that brand, I go to the point of sale looking for confirmation of that promise. But for many consumers who go to that point of sale, the promise is not fulfilled."

It's no wonder considering a recent PriceWaterhouseCoopers study, called "Brand: The New Challenge for HR," found that 60% of senior management said there is less focus on branding to employees than there is to clients. It's a potentially catastrophic oversight, says Bradshaw, since sales reps and channel partners "are the brand ambassadors whose behavior, attitudes and knowledge primarily determine how customers perceive the validity of the brand and products. Or to put it another way," he adds, "any employee or channel partner whose behavior is inconsistent with brand promises may destroy years of work building brand and product loyalty."

So ask yourself this: Is your sales team communicating the same promises and confirming the emotional expectations prospects receive through your company's external branding efforts? If not - if you're getting a hodgepodge of answers when you ask five reps about your company's brand - it's time to incorporate your salespeople into your company branding efforts. Start by surveying your team to determine their knowledge gaps. From there you can deliver the product and brand knowledge they need to fulfill your brand promises.

That's what companies such as Toyota are now doing. The company's slogan is Today, Tomorrow, Toyota and its core brand promise is quality. Thus, says Bradshaw, salespeople are trained to emotionalize the feeling of superior quality that consumers get from the company's ads. Like the company's external branding, salespeople aim to communicate the idea that the Toyota you buy is good for today - and good for tomorrow.

Need help getting there? Vuepoint has a technology platform called the Vuepoint Learning System (VLS) with the ability to assess and evaluate knowledge, deliver targeted training in a just-in-time manner and enable two-way communication between marketing and sales departments.

So next time your company is planning a branding campaign, make sure it doesn't forget its most important brand ambassadors - your sales team. After all, says Bradshaw, no matter how much money is spent building external brand and product awareness, in the end it is the salesperson's knowledge at the point of purchase that wins or loses a sale.

It's Not What You Know, It's Who You Know and Who Knows Your Prospect

Remember back in high school when that new girl showed up and you just knew you had to meet her? How did you do it? No doubt you did some research - figured out her name, where she came from, what classes she was taking - then started looking for connections among your circle of friends to figure out who knew someone who knew someone who knew the girl. By following that relationship path and then spending some time talking with her - bam! You had a date for Friday night.

In a sense, that's what Spoke Software does for sales professionals. This Web-based service enables users to identify prospects and gain access to buyers by leveraging their relationship network across the three steps of prospecting

1. Identify leads. The Spoke system includes information on more than 500,000 companies and 28 million people. You can search this massive database by geography, industry, company size, title and more. So say your prime target is VPs of marketing at pharmaceutical companies located in the Bay Area with at least \$500,000 in annual revenue. Enter those parameters into the system and Spoke will give you a list of targets, including the company's contact phone numbers and standard email conventions.

2. Research your leads. Spoke amasses all the information available on the Web about each company and person in its database. So once you've identified specific prospects, you'll be able to look up their company's financial information, relevant news feeds, analyst reports and any information available on that prospect – who they are, their role at the company, previous positions, biography, quotes from articles on the Web and so on.

3. Get access to your leads. This is where Spoke's social networking function comes in. Spoke lets users map out their relationships with people inside and outside of their companies. Thus the system can identify linkages between people and create relationship paths from sales reps to their prospects. Spoke will start your reps down that path by giving them a list of people they know who may know their target directly or by a degree or two of separation. From there, it's simply a matter of the sales rep working those connections to gain an introduction to his prospect.

When Amy Guarino arrived in April at Right90, a hosted software and services company that helps organizations implement better sales and operation planning processes (www.right90.com), her first goal as VP of sales was to aggressively build a pipeline, leveraging off the current customer base. She says, "Spoke was extremely helpful in my effort as I was able to quickly identify the right sales operations individuals in the firms that I am targeting." Recently she discovered one of her company's board members had a connection to the head of worldwide sales operations at a large semiconductor firm on her wish list of next customers. The board member facilitated an introduction and Right90 is now engaged in a conversation with that prospect. The connection, she says, saved her one to two months of work trying to gain access to the contact.

"I have been selling for more than 20 years, but have noticed that over the past 5 to 10 years, corporate decision makers have been bombarded with selling messages," Guarino observes. "As a result, getting through to them with a valid value proposition is getting more difficult. Spoke has provided me with a way to gain immediate credibility with high-level prospects and allows me to be productive and focused in my selling efforts."

In late May Spoke Software released version 2.0 of its hosted Web application, which includes the new Spoke Pro. Spoke Pro gives sales professionals a full set of advanced features – advanced company search, account tracking and integration to Salesforce.com and Siebel CRM OnDemand. Spoke Pro can be licensed from the Spoke's Web (www.spoke.com) for an introductory price of \$49 per month.

Five Foolproof Ways to Reduce Your Sales

As a sales manager you spend a lot of time teaching your reps how to do things right with your customers. Next time you're feeling rebellious, show them how to do it wrong. That's right – teach them how to annoy the heck out of your customers. Michael Schell, CEO of The Approved Group, Inc., says if your sales reps do any of these five things, they are guaranteed to aggravate your buyers. With a little practice, you'll see sales drop and customers defecting to your competition.

1. Show up unprepared for a meeting. When your goal is to annoy a prospect, your best bet is to arrive for a meeting without having researched the company, without an agenda and without all the equipment you need. You really can solidify the annoyance factor by going on to ask basic questions that are answered on the company's Website. "It's annoying when reps haven't done their research on my company," one buyer specialist told Schell. "I also don't like it when they ask me who the other supplier is. They should know who their competition is in my area." Anne Stilwell, director, contract and procurement services for Fannie Mae, summed it up like this: "I'm not impressed when reps meet with me without researching our company. Instead, they use up half the meeting asking me for background information. If they were true professionals, they would have done this before they came to see me. It's also annoying when they fail to plan the meeting so the important content can be covered in the time allotted."

2. Over promise and under deliver. To really tick off customers, tell them you can get them the order by the end week, no problem. Sure, you know there's no way that's going to happen, but you can cross that bridge when you there because after all your job is just to close the sale, right? "It's annoying when sales reps break procedures that are already in place just to close the sale and then end up not delivering on their promise," explained Jason Wihno supply purchaser for IKON-IMS. "Just be up front and promise what you can deliver. Missing deadlines is terrible. Don't say you can do something knowing you won't be able to."

3. Sell through the back door. Every kid knows this trick – if mom says no, go ask dad. Likewise, sales reps who a no from decision makers and really want to annoy them should simply go around them and try to get a yes from someone else. Here's the complaint in a nutshell: "I find it frustrating when I've rejected a rep's proposal and he or she calls back at another time attempting to speak to another buyer," lamented Kathi Wilson, facilities assistant for IDX Systems Corp. "It's unethical and sneaky and it makes for bad business."

4. Show up without an appointment. Appointments? Who needs them? Your prospects will be so wowed by your product or service they'll be happy to see you any time, right? If that's your thinking, congratulations – you've score 10 on the buyer-annoyance scale. Equally annoying – and grouped here on this list – is the practice of continuous cold-calling or leaving message after message in the hope the buyer will one day return your call just to get you to leaving messages. The reality: "Constantly calling and annoying me is going to push me off even farther," said Lise Perdue, a senior buyer.

5. Talk too much and listen too little. If buyers carefully explain why your service is not something their company needs right now and you forge ahead trying to make the sale anyway, you're an expert in this category. And if the buyers do have need of your service? You can still annoy them by charging in and telling them all about your solution and your company without stopping to ask about their needs. The key to successful annoyance here is to tune out anything customers say and focus on your agenda, which is making the sale. In the end, that's all that really matters, right?

Defy Conventional Wisdom – And Watch Your Sales Grow

In most big companies there's a basic trust in the wisdom of conventional wisdom. In truth, conventional wisdom is getting companies where they want to be, says Susan Lucia Annunzio, CEO of the Hudson Highland Center for High Performance and author of *Contagious Success: Spreading High Performance Throughout Your Organization* (Portfolio, 2004). The book, based on the first global study ever conducted on the factors that accelerate high performance, reveals some important findings – all of which defy conventional wisdom. Embrace these lessons, says Annunzio, and you'll be "well on your way to creating a high-performance environment."

1. Short-term thinking kills performance. If there's anyone who gets caught up in this issue, it's the sales manager, the leader responsible for meeting quarterly goals. Yet while the emphasis on quarterly results has never been greater, it turns out that the "number one inhibitor of high performance is short-term thinking – living for today at the expense of tomorrow," says Annunzio. Companies will take drastic actions to meet quarterly goals – cut staff and budgets, work their people longer hours, boost sales quotas – but those actions usually are detrimental to long-term performance. Employees become frustrated and burnt out. "Balancing the short and long term is perhaps the single biggest challenge facing companies today," Annunzio observes. Yet managers must have the fortitude to sacrifice short-term results in the interest of long-term opportunities if the company is to prosper.

2. The leader protects the group from company interference. Do you spend a lot of time acting as a buffer between the company and your sales team? If so, you're not alone – and you're likely a good manager. Annunzio's research found that one of the biggest differentiators between high-performing and nonperforming work groups is that the leaders of the former protect their group from the larger company so they can do their work. One leader called these efforts "intelligent disobedience." To boost performance, work with senior managers to start removing the barriers that are forcing you to spend time protecting your people instead of helping them make money for the company.

3. Call in your employees next time you have a sales challenge. The first thing most organizations do when facing a serious challenge is hire a team of consultants. Instead, the first move should be to consult your employees, says Annunzio. They know the company best and usually know what the problems are. The challenge is they're usually reluctant to bring up the problems for fear of losing their jobs. Thus you'll first need to offer them amnesty for telling the truth about what needs to be done. So the next time you're facing a serious sales challenge, look to your sales team.

for the answer.

4. Don't discount seemingly dumb ideas. Every day managers dismiss dumb ideas that might actually represent a paradigm shift they don't grasp. "You may be rejecting innovative ways to differentiate your company and move it forward because the ideas sound foreign to you," says Annunzio. Keep in mind, she adds, that workers coming into companies today see the world differently than their bosses. They generally are fluent in the language of new technology and thus their ideas might sound foreign. Rather than dismissing them – rather than looking for what's wrong with the ideas your team presents – look for what's smart. The future of your sales team depends on it.

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