



The Do-or-Die Questions You Need to Ask Yourself about Your Sales Channel

Business processes flow smoothly when all steps can be well-integrated into one logical progression.



The backdrop for all sales activity today is the reality that things are simultaneously becoming both easier and harder.

Easier in the sense that the power of technology can be applied to the process to make the most complicated parts more manageable. 🐦 Harder in the fact that those who make buying decisions are already attuned to the idea that they are increasingly being catered to in their buying experiences. 🐦 This places the onus on you to find the means that make your products as easy to buy as possible. In fact, a study by Forrester in 2014 showed that B2B buyers have almost identical expectations online for their buying experiences compared to those at B2C sites, including faster delivery times, visibility of inventory and a better customer experience.¹



¹ – “Building the B2B Omni-Channel Commerce Platform of the Future,” Forrester Consulting, <http://www.accenture.com/SiteCollectionDocuments/PDF/Accenture-Building-Omni-Channel-Commerce-Platform-Future.pdf>

These easier/harder forces pulling in opposing directions define the modern sales channel. 🐦

You may sell through a single sales channel, or you may utilize a dozen different paths for selling your products, but the reality in today's business climate is that sales are made when the buyer becomes convinced that you are delivering real value to them, and not just supplying a product. Put another way, buying decisions for highly engineered products are rarely based on pricing concerns, but are far more likely to be determined by whoever can provide a quality product through the easiest buying process possible. 🐦

Is that the standard you are measuring your sales efforts against these days?

Let's discuss some specific points you can use in evaluating your sales channel(s), including how your weaknesses could be interpreted by your potential customers.

Do your sales channels provide accurate, up-to-date information on your products?

This is obviously a big one, because it speaks directly back to the variations, options, customizations and specials involved with your product offerings. A static paper process that can't address the current realities of your inventory or production workload is a problem. Add in a slow-to-respond quoting process that requires days or weeks, and the whole operation starts to scream "stuck in the 1970s" to those who are considering doing business



with you. Decisions today are made by buyers who are able to execute dynamic, real-time searches—and then make decisions based on what is presented. Consider how we purchase airline tickets today as opposed to even 15 years ago. All of the options in a complex system are boiled down to one interface that is steered by the scheduling and itinerary needs of the customer, and those options—including price and availability—are delivered back to the potential buyer within a matter of less than a minute.

Your product offerings are likely to be even more intricate than the standard the airlines had to meet. But that is the kind of buying experience most people expect today. If you sell through those kinds of channels, both your customers and your dealers need to have quick, at-hand access to not only what you can sell to them, but also how quickly it can be done and what options are feasible. 🐦 If you don't provide it and a competitor does, you are opening the door to market erosion.

Is your channel able to deliver everything required for the buyer to make a decision? 🐦

Buyers know what they want, and you know what you have the capacity to provide. 🐦 It's the space in between those two simple points that defines the ultimate success of the buying transaction.

You've dealt with the reality of that perspective since the day you first started to manufacture your products. Yes, there is an emphasis on speed today, but that doesn't relieve you of the requirement that what you provide also has to be 100 percent accurate. 🐦 A survey by the "Heavy Reading" analyst group found that the percentage of B2B companies able to keep ordering errors to fewer than one in 10 was under 10 percent.² Speed gets you nowhere if your order at the end doesn't result in a valid product that meets the needs that the customer has expressed. 🐦

"Sales speed without a better user experience that results in better outcomes only gets you nowhere faster."

2 – "Being a Leader in B2B Order Management," Heavy Reading, <http://www.lightwellinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/WP-OMS-Leader-OMS.pdf>



You also need to consider the experience level of individual buyers as you structure your sales channel. 🐦 It runs the gamut from buyers new to the process who need strong guidance at each step along the way (this is the kind of “guided selling” most people are familiar with from shopping on the Internet) to a different setup for frequent, repeat customers who know exactly what is typically available, what their preferences are and how they have bought from you in the past.

The experienced buyer may need only a basic and direct experience in interacting with your sales channel, but the “newbie” will benefit from having specifics made clear to them. 🐦 Are particular colors or materials for all items on an order specified? Will they be seeking exceptions, and will the process have the ability to specify those exceptions?

Once the specifics of the order are decided upon, can your sales channel provide visual confirmation of the product? 🐦

The customer knows what he has in mind to fill his purchase needs. Will you be delivering it? 🐦 A simple and obvious way to confirm this is by providing a visual representation of the product that reflects the choices they have made.

The power of such a presentation is undeniable. The product becomes tangible from its presence right there on a screen, and thus makes completing the buying process an ever more likely conclusion. One recent survey showed that 67 percent of buyers consider images very important in their decision-making, carrying even more weight than product information, full descriptions and customer ratings.³ (That was a B2C survey, but it’s likely that preferences in B2B would be comparable.)

However, generating such an image does require increased capabilities from the tool driving your sales channel. That could be as simple as creating an engineering drawing that reflects the specifics of the order. Or, it could move to another level where 3D model generation can be produced, so that the potential buyer can rotate and manipulate the configuration they have selected to make sure it really is what they fully expect it to be.

Adding visual capacity to your sales channel is another level of complexity, but the sales power that comes with it makes it a consideration that many complex manufacturers will benefit from. 🐦



³ – “It’s All about the Images,” (infographic), MDG Advertising, <http://www.mdgadvertising.com/blog/its-all-about-the-images-infographic/>



Can your sales channel deliver price quotes quickly, regardless of the order's complexity? 🐦

Going back to the differences between customers that we mentioned earlier (those who are new versus those who are experienced in using your sales channel), you need to be prepared to move to the quoting phase with the dexterity to meet the needs of customers coming from both ends of this spectrum. From your own experience, you know that because of the complexity level involved with your products, quoting both accurately and quickly can be a hairy process. 🐦

If your sales channel is going to be able to handle the demands that come with quoting, it is going to have to have the capacity to account for all of the various business conditions that impact your pricing, and this is no small burden. It is also why developing the most advanced tool possible to support your sales channel is in your own best business interest.

The interface that presents this information to the customer should be smooth and informative. 🐦 The burden of dealing with the complexity must reside "behind the curtain" with you, the owner of the sales channel. Is your internal expertise within your company able to be fed into your sales channel and processed, so that all of the specifics that go into quoting are timely? 🐦 Can you accurately and easily quote out of the sales channel even when the customer makes special requests?

The answers to these types of questions will go a long way in determining just how impressed your potential customer is with their buying process. And for them, their emotional reaction to the buying process goes a long way toward how they feel about the overall experience in dealing with your company.

If your sales channels include a dealer network, are you providing the right kind of quoting tool to become the supplier of choice for those dealers? 🐦

This point is a bit of an offshoot from the overall message of this paper, but it's certainly worth bringing up for the many manufacturers that utilize dealers to reach their customers. If this describes the way you sell, you have to be aware not only of competitive pressures that steer the decisions of buyers, but also those who impact the business processes at the dealer level. 🐦

Dealers are no different than customers in the sense that they are going to want to do business with the supplier who makes things easiest for them and gives them the best deal. 🐦 The key realization behind this is that it has major ramifications for your success, when you consider the volume of business that can be impacted by these preference decisions made by dealers. If a competitor is making it easier for a dealer to sell their product than you are, there is going to be a bias you have to overcome at the dealer level just to keep from losing ground.



Does your sales channel accommodate the kind of business pressures that your customers are under today? 🐦

Being timely and accurate are not just courtesy considerations for your customers—they equate to big dollars in their overall operations. Everyone in business understands the pressures that have come with just-in-time principles and other cost-containment strategies. Those pressures begin to take shape as early as the beginning stages of the customer's buying experience.

As customers are making buying decisions, they are beginning to project the near-future of their operations. They have timelines and optimal standards for doing business. You become part of their calculations once they select you as the supplier who best fits their needs. 🐦

In these demands, you find yourself lining up on the same side of the field as your customer. You both benefit the most if operations in delivering your products proceed as smoothly and predictably as your sales channel projects that they will. The insurance policy backing this confluence of your mutual interests is a sales channel that can handle all of the components involved with timeliness, accuracy and error avoidance.



Do you know where your sales channel ends?

It used to be safe to assume that the boundaries for where and how work would get done were fairly predictable. Buying decisions were made in offices or conference rooms where the tools to guide those decisions were close at hand.

Those assumptions can no longer be made, however. Operations floors in business are increasingly seeing mobile tools introduced. This has real implications for how you may end up selling. A *Forbes* story highlighting 10 ways that mobile is revolutionizing manufacturing in 2015 included as a point, "Making distributed order management more transparent to sales while increasing order fulfillment accuracy".⁴ This point of emphasis strongly suggests that mobile considerations need to start in the sales channel and be configured to be part of the entire production and delivery cycle.

It's not enough to assume anymore that your sales channel only has to be accessible through desktop and laptop computer screens. Smart phones and tablets are tools of choice among those in your marketplaces, and your sales channel needs to take the presence of these tools into consideration when determining how it presents and shares information.

Each of the points presented here point to specific directions that are impacting the functional demands of sales channels. Assuming that dated aspects of your sales channels won't catch up to you is a risky proposition. Take a look at how you are currently selling. Applied properly, these questions have the potential to lower the risk that's inherent in your sales channels and increase your profitability.



⁴ – "10 Ways Mobility Is Revolutionizing Manufacturing," *Forbes.com*, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/louiscolombus/2015/04/20/10-ways-mobility-is-revolutionizing-manufacturing/>





More questions about sales channels?

Jim Wilson, product director for Cincom CPQ™, would be glad to help with any questions you might have about strengthening your sales channels. Contact Jim via e-mail at jwilson@cincom.com.

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