

B2B Selling
Why brand matters.

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You have a B2B brand whether you intend to or not. Now what?

Companies that cater to the tradesman rather than the consumer, in most cases, don't understand what separates them from their competition. What separates them is their brand. Brand is the important missing component in most B2B settings, and companies need to wake up to this sales opportunity.

Unfortunately, B2B salespeople often sell everything but the brand. They will sell on the basis of price, delivery, product quality, features, benefits, and warranty, but seldom do they speak to what the brand means to the buyer in terms of their operational efficiencies, experiences, or emotional connection.

Yes, I said emotional connection. You see, many trade salespeople erroneously believe that it's all about the logic. We sell what we can see, but neglect the intangible and emotional asset that the brand has become for many buyers within the B2B setting. One of my customers put it well: "The brand is like the wind; you can't see it, but you can feel it, so you know that it exists and that it can be a gentle breeze or a powerful gust." For most B2B companies it is barely a gentle whisper.

The Old Way of Selling

Most B2B salespeople have been taught to sell intuitively based on the customer's reaction to the following three things: product (how well it meets the buyer's standards for price, styling, and quality), relationship (what level of trust, history, and integrity has been built between buyer and seller), and performance (how good is the company's follow-through, problem solving, and customer service).

The hard truth is, products can become outdated; relationships can go awry; performance can slip in one transaction--and competition can duplicate all of these! Essentially, trade buyers traditionally compare your company to the competition around these components, making you merely a me-too choice.

The New Way of B2B Selling

However, bringing your brand into the selling arena makes you bulletproof. The competition can't duplicate your people and the power of your brand. B2B salespeople are usually furthest removed from the idea of brand selling, because their brands are not easily identifiable or visible. So how do you make a brand come alive in a B2B setting?

First, don't abandon the tried--and true first three steps in the buyer-seller interaction; they are still critical to an organization properly serving its customers. Products still must meet buyers' needs and specifications for a fair price. Relationships still must be cultivated, even with long-time customers. Performance still must include strong service after the sale, perhaps more so now than ever. Without these factors, a brand is little more than pure imagery, a hollow promise.

However, you need to add a fourth step in your selling process--the brand--in order to extend the playing field, avoid being a me-too supplier, and leverage the power of your unique brand.

Bringing the Brand Alive Using Brand Pillars

You can bring the brand alive by using what I call brand pillars. Brand pillars are the key components that make up your brand. These brand pillars represent strategic choices and investments the company has made over its history to provide better products or services to its key customer base. They are usually aspects of the company's operations, approach to the marketplace, or a business model, yet they have a distinct customer focus. They are not generally birthed in the boardroom, but originate on the lips of the customer. Brand pillars have simply become so much a part of the company that they are widely seen by your B2B customers as part of the fabric of the business.

For example, an industrial products company's brand pillars may be end-user commitment, quality and value, innovation and creativity, and unmatched service. Notice that although there is very little specific description of the company's products in these pillars, buyers, especially in the B2B setting, make purchasing choices based on them because they represent certain priorities, strategies, or operating advantages that imply value. That value has to be leveraged by weaving brand language into conversations throughout the company and into salespeople's conversations with B2B customers.

Brand pillars are unique advantages your company has worked hard to build. They

- are impenetrable by the competition;
- differentiate your brand;
- are valued and mentioned by customers;
- are proven over time; and
- are seen as part of the fabric of your company.

In a B2B selling situation you can bring your brand alive and differentiate yourself from the competition by

- taking credit for what you do well as a company;
- differentiating your brand using your brand pillars;
- intentionally equipping your salespeople to talk about it; and
- remembering what got you here.

Sell the Brand First

Last, you need to talk about your brand first. That will differentiate you from the competition right up front in the conversation. Brand should be at the forefront and not buried just beneath the surface (like a whisper) of all crucial conversations--both internal and external. Only then can

brand deliver true differentiation and competitive advantage for the B2B company.

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