

Sell the Brand, Not the Product

Ask any sales rep about his company's brand and most will mutter something about brand being a marketing issue. And therein lies a major problem in sales, argues Dan Stiff, president of Leadership Performance Development, Inc., and author of *Sell the Brand First: How to Sell Your Brand and Create Lasting Customer Loyalty* (McGraw-Hill, 2007). Sales reps should not only be able to articulate their brand strengths, they should leverage them as a major selling tool. After all, your products, prices, and service can all be duplicated by the competition, but the power of your brand, says Stiff, is unique to your company alone.

Stiff tells the story of when he worked as a sales rep for Black & Decker in the mid-1980s. "We were all *product* salespeople," he recalls. So he was unprepared for the question he got from Target's CEO one day when the two of them were alone in an elevator. After Stiff introduced himself, the CEO mused, "Black & Decker – that's a great brand. Why do you have a great brand?" Stiff remembers rambling on about the company's products and "the more I sputtered about products, the more his eyes glazed over. When he got off the elevator, I was totally embarrassed."

It was a harsh lesson, but one that Stiff never forgot. He tells the story today to drive home an important point: What would you tell your most important customer's CEO about your brand if the two of you were alone in an elevator? You need a short story about why your product or service is different, says Stiff. You need to be able to articulate it in 30 seconds or less. And you need to base your story on what Stiff calls your "brand pillars."

Brand pillars are your impenetrable advantages – the unique advantages your company has worked hard to build and that no one can penetrate without significant cost, time, and training. For instance, if your customers are always telling you how easy your company is to contact and how quickly you resolve problems, your 24/7, multi-contact options (phone, Web, live chat, email, etc.) might be a brand pillar. Once you understand that brand pillar, you can reinforce it using case studies and examples of past success, testimonials, and industry articles that highlight your incredible accessibility. Then build on that position by "stacking" your brand pillars together to "leverage your brand sales language," says Stiff. "This will create a formidable B2B selling process and a consistent picture of your brand for the customer."

Notice Stiff hasn't said a word about products. That's because unless there's something about your product – the technology, design, etc. – that is a true brand pillar, that product is not going to sell your company. "Competitors can duplicate your product but they can't duplicate your business and how your customers view it," says Stiff. Smart managers will leverage those brand advantages as a leading sales message.