

SALES CONTENT STRATEGY

The Foundation for Successful Sales Enablement

Content for the Enabled Sales Force

Sales content should achieve two major goals. The first is to ensure that a sales force quickly understands how to sell the company's products and services effectively. In this context, sales enablement includes:

- *Product specifications*
- *Industry requirements or challenges*
- *Specific target buyers and their unique challenges or needs*
- *Competitive offerings and comparisons*
- *The value and benefits of the company's offerings*
- *Sales skills and sales methodology*
- *Operational processes*

The end result is an enabled, confident sales force that has the necessary, up-to-date facts at its fingertips to discuss business or industry challenges and the value of the company's offerings in the context of the prospect's business and individual role.

The second major goal of sales content is to engage prospects with the product and brand so that they can envision using the offering to solve their business problems. Sales content also helps customers overcome concerns and move past roadblocks during the sales process by helping them to build a business case or justification for the investment.

Prospects today have access to a great deal of information about product capabilities and competition before they ever speak to a sales person. In the current environment, the enabled sales force requires content precisely matched to a prospect's business issues and challenges. The new generation of sales professionals must establish themselves as peers of business leaders so they are perceived as a source of insight and thought leadership rather than providers of product specifications. This requires support that is laser-focused on creating content that both customers and the sales force find relevant, educational, useful and actionable.

Sales enablement as a unique discipline is a fairly recent phenomenon. One major advantage of the sales enablement approach is the elimination of silos and the adoption of a more structured, cohesive and disciplined approach to content creation.

This paper provides a roadmap for developing a sales content strategy, including the adoption of content governance to ensure a motivated, successful, enabled sales force.

Sales Content Excellence and Governance

Since sales and marketing teams have very different goals for their use of content, it should not be surprising that about 80 percent of the content created by most marketing departments is rarely or never used by the sales team, according to [research](#)¹ from ITSMA. The same source also [reports](#)² that content creation takes up about 16 percent of most marketing budgets and represents the largest cost category in the budget. With marketing resources stretched thinner

than ever before, it is incredibly wasteful to use those scarce resources on content that doesn't move the sales process along. However, since it is difficult to attribute a lead or a sale to a specific piece of content, most marketing leaders continue to operate blindly rather than basing sales content decisions and priorities on measurements of success.

In place of content delivered by marketing, sales reps often use whatever has worked for them in the past, even though it may include outdated information and positioning, or spend precious selling time developing content on their own. Sometimes the sales content problem reaches the attention of executives which results in a flurry of random content without the benefit of a planned strategy. As a result, content does not tell

a consistent, up-to-date story, address a specific buyer's need or engage the customer with the product or brand. According to [Amanda F. Batista from IDC](#)³, B2B companies' inability to align sales and marketing teams around the right processes and technologies has cost them upwards of 10% or more of revenue per year, or \$100 million for a billion-dollar company. Clearly, developing and implementing a sales content strategy is a worthwhile investment.

Creating impactful content is not a simple undertaking. It requires a thoughtful, reasoned approach to match the design of each content item with the necessary attributes and sales stages. It is an ongoing process that adapts to changing customer and business needs and quickly adopts new forms of content and methods of delivery.

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Attributes Of Effective Sales Content

Today's successful sales content shares the following basic attributes:

Engaging and interactive

Content must be easy to understand and to use. It must be up to date, easy to digest, conform to branding guidelines and be available from any device at any time. Unless content is engaging and useful, customers and prospects will disregard it and it will not serve its primary purpose of advancing the sales process. Leading sales and content marketers are investing more in multimedia and interactive formats rather than longer, text-based forms of content because audiences are busier than ever and prefer to receive information in shorter bursts of time, on whatever device they happen to be using. Content with an element of interactivity can better engage the customer with a company's brand and create a relationship in the customer's mind between the offering and a desired outcome, such as increased profitability, higher sales or faster return on investment.

For example, interactive return on investment models enable the customer to create their own compelling events and adds urgency to the sales cycle based on information that the customer generates internally rather than data supplied from a

vendor. Interactive content creates brand engagement in a low risk but compelling environment, and is one way to advance the sale or restart a stalled sales cycle. However, the interactive content must be visually appealing, easy to use, and accurate if it is to succeed.

Actionable

Effective content provides new insight or thought-provoking ideas that challenge preconceived notions and inspire the prospect to action. It may advance new ideas through thought-leadership or show subject matter expertise that is useful to the customer. For sales reps, valuable content enables them to move the sales process along and helps to cement a relationship with the customer that positions the rep as a trusted advisor or valued peer rather than a mere order taker that wastes the customer's most valuable resource – time.

Reusable

Sales content must be constructed such that it can be leveraged and reused across multiple channels and delivery media. It should be customizable to address the needs of specific target buyers with specific challenges or needs.

Just as web advertising is often constructed on the fly using resources from a content management system (CMS) to deliver precisely targeted messages, the best sales enablement collateral delivers exactly the right message for a specific persona at the exact point in the sales process when they are ready to hear and receive the message.

Making content reusable helps to reduce the cost of producing assets while simultaneously improving the effectiveness of the content and reinforcing consistent messaging and branding. Content and messages can be created once and used and distributed in countless ways. For example, some companies have had success by creating content that sales reps can easily personalize by adding a unique message. This might take the form of adding a personalized introduction to a canned video or using content in webinars and at trade shows.

Reusability could also take the form of message or content “snippets” that can be readily combined to create customized interactive collateral. The same concept could even be applied to traditional content such as slides for a presentation. By using a library of slides cross-indexed by target persona, role, industry, challenge, benefit and sales stage, a rep can quickly assemble a concise presentation that encompasses exactly the right tone and message for a client meeting. Multiple spec sheets

representing various products or configurations could be combined into a single data packet, or several video vignettes could become an engaging showcase of customer successes or endorsements.

Trackable

Customers prefer to do much of their research on their own without relying on the sales force to present information and guide them through the process. When they have access to engaging content and collateral, they will use it to educate themselves about the product. However, if the sales rep is unaware that the customer has accessed content, a major opportunity to connect or reconnect with the prospect may slip by.

Reps need the ability to provide access to the specific content that matches the customers need and stage of the buy cycle, but the rep also needs visibility to know when the prospect has accessed and consumed the content. It is also helpful to know how long the prospect spent with the piece and if they forwarded it to other members of the organization or just took a cursory look at it. This knowledge enables reps to create a strategy for their next contact with the prospect and can provide extremely valuable insight for prioritization and sales forecasting.

Findable

No matter how good the content is, if the sales force can't find it quickly when they need it, that content will remain unused. Any resources put into creating content are wasted without an effective content management system that helps to identify and serve the right collateral for a particular situation.

A content repository should have the ability to provide secure access to users inside the firewall, such as a company's own sales force, and to users outside the firewall such as customers and prospects. Users today have little patience for paper brochures and data sheets, so enabling them to browse and research the offering on their own time is a better solution.

In addition, an accessible online content management system/content repository allows the sales rep to orchestrate and curate collateral to meet a specific buyer's needs. Targeted content that addresses the user by role or by industry, for example, is much more effective than any general purpose content. In addition, sending a prospect to a personalized, curated page to learn about the product is often perceived as a value-added activity performed by the rep on the prospect's behalf.

However, before the rep can orchestrate these customized content portals, they must be able to find and identify the appropriate collateral. All content should be tagged with data or metadata that identifies the appropriate persona and sales stage allowing them to encounter and discover content when it is needed. Other ways to make content findable include embedding links in QR codes, sales materials or articles as well as websites. All content should be searchable, version controlled and up-to-date.

Responsive

Internet connection via mobile devices has been exceeding access from PCs since January, 2014 and has steadily increased every month according to [research from Enders and published on CNN.com](#)⁴.

Responsive content that displays properly on any screen is now of crucial importance.

Targeted

One way to ensure that prospects and customers find content usable is target it to their specific needs. This means that effective content varies by role, by industry or by a unique challenge the company faces, and is available for each sales cycle stage. Understanding each buying persona and their decision-making role is crucial to ensuring that content is engaging and moves the conversation forward.

Collateral meant to influence an executive must address the business strategy, return on investment and overall value of an offering. It must enable reps to position themselves as a peer of the executive in order to advance the sales and earn the right to communicate directly at that level without going through lower rungs of gatekeepers and intermediaries. Decision makers whose roles include responsibility

for P&L will focus on higher level values and benefits, support for defined strategies and return on investment while end users and lower level employees will nearly always show interest in the detailed features and specifications, disregarding other considerations. Reps and marketing departments should not attempt to address the different needs of all these audiences with a single piece of collateral.

Effective content must be memorable to be truly useful. The value of sales content is as much a matter of how something is said as it is about the information presented. Not only must the message be presented in a way that appeals to the target's needs, it must also be stated in a way that separates the company's offerings from those of competitors. Either the message must be uniquely compelling or the delivery must be uniquely memorable, otherwise, the content will not move the sales process forward.

Maximizing Sales Content Effectiveness

To maximize the effectiveness of sales content, it is imperative that all the factors that affect its creation, delivery and consumption are addressed.

Constructed and delivered dynamically

While it is certainly possible to create individual and uniquely compelling content for every combination of role and sales stage, it is more cost effective and productive to create content that can be dynamically constructed and delivered to specific buyers at the appropriate point in the cycle.

Dynamic content requires the use of modern content management and delivery tools that enable creation of unique pieces from a library of reusable content. Reusable content requires a disciplined approach to content creation so that every piece in the library is consistent and up to date.

Content governance

Most organizations are not able to measure the effectiveness of content and often are not even sure what content is available because there's often an undisciplined approach to content creation involving many departments. For example, the engineering or R&D team might be responsible for creating data sheets and spec sheets; support might create brochures or presentations on support levels or implementation and installation services; and various regional offices might create their own localized content. The result is a chaotic, decentralized, expensive process that leads to ineffective collateral and suboptimal results.

Content strategy must include responsibility for content governance and program management. No sales content should be published unless it has been approved by an identified member of the sales enablement team who has been given authority and responsibility for content governance.

The content governance and approval process should encompass more than simple editing and assurance that the piece follows branding guideline. Content governance must include program management, including prioritization on what pieces should be created as well as control of the actual content. Before any work

is done on content, the purpose of the piece, the target persona and the sales stage should be defined. This governance must extend beyond content created by marketing to cover every piece of collateral created by any group within the company. If an item is intended for customer consumption, it must fall under the governance of sales enablement or the company risks squandering resources and possibly stalling or derailing sales cycles.

The content governance process means that content will no longer be created in silos within the organization, but by a cross-functional team, with a content governance manager, all focused on ensuring that the content serves the company and its sales force as effectively as possible.

Proper program management also ensures that the company will have pieces in its content arsenal that are effective for every stage in the pipeline from generating awareness, nurturing suspects and driving warm leads to opportunities, all the way to closing the sale.

Content reorganization

The effective sales enablement team will want to take steps to ensure that its existing and planned content meets its needs. A thorough inventory of collateral may result in culling outdated or ineffective pieces. Once the inventory of usable collateral is available, the sales enablement team can take steps to identify and fill gaps.

One of the most important steps in this process is to understand and identify the target personas. Companies often gloss over the process of creating personas in favor of simply identifying a few roles and developing basic value statements for each. True persona creation is a data-driven exercise that results in an understanding of the individuals the sales force needs to engage, and the challenges and issues faced by these individuals. Armed with this detailed knowledge, an educated sales force can address the issues confidently and on an equal footing with even the loftiest titles in an organization.

Targets obviously need to include decision makers and approvers, but they must also include the people who can say “no” and derail the deal. It’s important to understand their concerns and to arm the sales force with the content necessary to address these issues.

The next step is to identify the architecture of the content. This may include a definition of specific pieces or it may address tools and levels of messaging and construction that affect the ability to use dynamic content creation.

Now that the company has identified the necessary building blocks and any current gaps in coverage, the next step is the creation of an editorial calendar. This identifies the specific timing and delivery of missing pieces, and the timetables for regularly refreshing existing collateral. The editorial calendar serves to put some discipline around random or unauthorized content creation and allows level resource planning and effective budgeting of both time and money.

Finally, the company must identify the repository or repositories for storing and delivering collateral. The repositories must be accessible, simple and well controlled. There should be a defined taxonomy for tagging content, an approval workflow and controls to prevent unauthorized posting. In addition, there must be an easy way to monitor usage and to notify the sales force of new additions or updates to old content.

Content delivery and measurement

It is axiomatic in business that you can’t improve what you don’t measure, and content is no exception to the rule. Content management systems should provide controls and reports that identify users of content and popular or unpopular items. Ideally, the system should be able to measure usage by customers as well as by members of the sales team.

The perfect delivery system should be able to dynamically format and combine content to match a particular prospect and deal. In addition, fostering internal and external communities can increase the impact of collateral. External communities spontaneously erupt when prospects forward specific pieces of content to other people in the company or to contacts at other organizations. Internal communities exist when the sales force begins to share best practices and successful engagements. The development of both types of communities are signs that the sales enablement team is succeeding at its charter.

Sales Content Strategy: A Continuous Process

Companies looking to adopt the discipline of sales content governance should follow the Four A's: assess, audit, align and action.

By adopting a continuous process of addressing each aspect, an organization will quickly improve its content effectiveness and discover a more energized and successful sales force.

Assess

The first step is to assess the effectiveness of available content and to understand which collateral the sales force uses and why they don't use the other pieces. It also means reviewing the sales process and the target personas in preparation for updating or creating new content and the supporting framework for success.

Audit

Next, every piece of collateral should be inventoried and graded in terms of effectiveness and usability. If a piece cannot be clearly identified as useful to a specific persona or a specific step in the sales process, it should be retired or revamped. The audit should also identify gaps in coverage so that missing items likely to have an impact on sales can be given a

high priority on the editorial calendar. In addition, the effectiveness of the content management and delivery systems should be evaluated.

Align

After formulating a strategy and plan, the entire company needs to be aligned to the new, more disciplined content creation process. This may take some time as departments that have been used to creating content independently from the marketing team may need to adjust, but the impact on sales will make the effort worthwhile. Unless the strategy, content and the delivery are aligned, there will be waste in the process that reduces sales force effectiveness and does not help the company achieve its goals

Action

Finally, it is time to improve the effectiveness of sales content and for the sales force to go in to action using new pieces as they are released. It's important to ensure continual communication between the sales force and the team during all phases, but especially during the action phase.

The team must find effective ways to notify the sales force that new content is available, and they must educate the reps on how and when to use the new pieces most effectively. The sales force must provide feedback to the team about their success or issues with collateral and content, including any customer feedback. Effective content management tools will help by measuring content usage, but specific feedback is extremely valuable even on an anecdotal level.

When working properly, the process is a closed loop feedback system that enables the company to reach higher and higher levels of achievement. Each iteration of content helps hone the message and improve its resonance with the prospect so that the sales force is enabled to orchestrate the sales process in a structured and predictable way.

Conclusion

The confluence of content management processes and technologies with the shift in buyer education and research preferences means that the time is right for companies to adopt a structured sales content program.

Companies that decide to move forward with adoption of a sales content office will find that their budget goes further as their content becomes more effective and reusable across platforms and channels. In addition, they will enjoy more predictable sales cycles and a more even revenue stream. Their sales force will be more successful, reducing turnover and helping to increase the effectiveness of its marketing and sales disciplines. While it takes some effort to adopt a disciplined sales content strategy, the positive medium and long-term results and competitive advantage far outweigh the initial efforts.

About the author

Marc McNamara is Chief Content Strategist for The Value Shift. He has been helping companies establish programmatic approaches for the creation and use of content in marketing, sales and support for more than 25 years. Marc's work and facilitation has resulted in companies realizing significant gains in the return on their content investments by providing insight and methods for improving the impact of their communications while reducing their overall costs of creation.

About The Value Shift

We offer sales content consulting services, content production, content collaboration services, and program management services. Our professionals will help your sales productivity / enablement efforts ramp up quickly and ensure ongoing success.

Contact us at 855-259-2853 or register today at <http://www.thevalueshift.com/contact-us> to schedule a free 30-minute consultation from one of our sales content strategists.

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