

1 FUNCTION DESCRIPTION

Closely aligned with and supported by the Marketing, Branding & PR function (MBPR), the Sales & Customer Service (S&CS) function focuses nearly exclusively on customers to drive near term business revenue and margins through product positioning, pricing strategies, short-term promotions, and direct customer interactions before, during and after the sale. In addition to executing efficient transactions, S&CS's role in most companies includes a range of activities including forecasting sales, monitoring competitive activity, prospecting for and retaining customers, and implementing channel or partner programs.

2 VALUE PROPOSITION

S&CS can provide valuable insights to the company by directly representing the customer's values, preferences and expectations. Most successful salespeople know that many customers use objective features and benefits to justify decisions that they have made for subjective, if not seemingly irrational reasons. S&CS can thus play a vital role in the design, prototyping, launch and success of sustainable product innovations and in understanding the non-price preferences and expectations of customers related to sustainability themes.

In reverse, S&CS represents, as the direct face of the company to many customers, company products and brands to the marketplace to maximize revenue by promoting its tangible value proposition and also brand purpose, values, and personality. For S&CS, sustainability themes and specific innovations provide a range of opportunities to engage customers in new conversations to differentiate offerings, provide new forms of value, influence objective or subjective buying criteria, and create deeper and long-term relationships.

3 STRATEGIC INTEGRATION

To fulfill its purpose to drive revenue and improve margins by satisfying customers, S&CS must understand the potential value and priority of sustainability themes from the perspective of the customer and how the company's brand promise and offering serve them. To better integrate sustainability into S&CS strategy, Marketing, Branding & PR together with the Sustainability function must demonstrate that brand positions and product offerings designed around the company's sustainability priorities can influence a sufficient number of buying decisions to warrant investment in sales training, promotions, and more importantly, valuable "face-time"¹ with customers. Once established, these sustainability priorities form the basis for defining, tracking and setting goals to influence existing or new customer segments. As sustainability matures, it will increasingly become embedded in the S&CS story of "who" the company is and its role in the industry or community.

4 OPERATIONAL INTEGRATION

To integrate sustainability into its operational routine, S&CS must work with MBPR and the Sustainability function to define priority customer segments and develop positioning, promotions, and sales aids to engage customers around the company's priority sustainability issues. Standard sales qualification and customer service processes should be adapted and communicated to help diagnose and respond to customer priorities in sustainability themes. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems should be modified to track priority segments (sales, market share, etc.) and specific sustainability-related preferences and expectations of priority customers. All customer-facing employees should be educated in basic sustainability themes that may arise from customers, important "talking points" in support of the company's sustainability strategy, and how to use sales aids or internal expert information systems. Existing customer service systems and training should be modified to respond to and tabulate customer inquiries on sustainability themes with supporting escalation procedures to reach deeper expertise when appropriate. Sustainability professionals or other technical experts can be assigned to major account sales teams to guide sales strategy or directly interact with customer experts. Some companies have found it valuable to create business development teams with deep expertise in sustainability to support the broader S&CS effort.

¹ Interaction time with customers whether literally face-to-face or intermediated through telephone or digital technology in professional business-to-business sales calls, product aisles of B2C retail stores, or "eyeballs" on ecommerce sites.

5 CULTURAL INTEGRATION

In particular, the sales side of the S&CS culture is intensely competitive, driven by sales quotas, market share, and commission based compensation. They are highly relational with a bias toward action rather than theory or analysis. Their currency is their personal credibility, product line expertise, and relationships. Environments vary greatly from cultivating a few, personal, long-term relationships resulting in relatively large transactions or recurring orders to retail sales in product aisles to thousands of highly repetitive, faceless telephone or e-commerce transactions. The common element is activating the needs or preferences of the customer to stimulate a purchase whether through impulse or protracted deliberation and negotiation. For the most part, if something does not help attract the attention of a customer or influence a sale, it will be ignored. On the other hand, they are highly adaptive and quick to integrate winning strategies and tactics. Therefore, to better engage S&CS to integrate sustainability into their culture, frame sustainability from the customer's perspective not general externalities, help them uncover and activate customer interest in sustainability themes, partner with them to prototype new products with "Innovator" or "Early Adopter"² customers. Because of their need to be seen as an expert in their product lines, many will avoid unfamiliar subjects like sustainability. Provide them training and easy access to subject matter experts to respond quickly to their customers. Tap their best relationships to make their high priority customers feel valued while providing high fidelity input to company materiality assessments and open innovation product redesign.

6 EMERGING TRENDS AND INNOVATIONS

Sustainability to enhance customer relationships

The key to connecting with customers is to provide them with opportunities to engage in a two-way interaction with the company through customer-company forums, feedback and review opportunities, and a continuous dialogue around sustainability. Leading companies are asking customers to join them in working together on importance causes. Events are being designed to engage customers on issues they care about while gently aligning the brand and its values with the cause. Rather than blatant product promoters, sales and customer service employees become the human face of the company and brand ambassadors for its causes.

From a transactional toward a relationship view of customers

Over the past few years we have witnessed significant changes in business and the economy, which have impacted the way organizations and customers relate to service. One of the main changes is the move from a transactional economy to a relationship economy, which has altered the view of the value of customer service to business performance. Today's customers are savvy, discerning and demanding. They expect organizations to relate to them as individuals, not just as transactions. Across the value chain, dealing with customers, suppliers, partners and their internal customers, the quality of an organization's relationships is becoming a determining factor in their success, and sustainability can be a key factor.

Using CRM technology to track sustainability preferences

Whether through the expansion of internal CRM systems or universal tracking and tailoring of individual consumer experiences based in internet activity, businesses can capture, track, understand and serve the specific expectations and preferences and unprecedented speed and granularity. Leading companies are tracking individual customer preferences in sustainability themes and aggregating them into newly defined market segments in B2B and B2C markets.

² See Rogers theory of the diffusion of innovation. Innovators and early adopters value participating in new ideas (rewrite). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion_of_innovations