

# Are shifting winds in the market giving you headaches? Be proactive. Know your customer.

By Kate Gluck



**Nothing is static.**  
**Expect each day to bring new threat and opportunity.**  
*~John Wooden*

## **Be Prepared to Capitalize on Opportunity & React to Threats:**

- *Knowledge = Opportunity*
- *Reps need to know the market inside and out in order to move out of the realm of “order taker” and into the coveted position of “trusted advisor.”*
- *Reps need to routinely share information with management so that they may analyze the situation, measure the appropriate response, and make shifts in tactics or overall strategy as needed.*

In business and in life (as on Wooden’s basketball court), situations can and do change rapidly. Those who are successful are the ones who are out in front, in tune with the dynamics of the market and able to rapidly switch gears to adjust to changing trends, new opportunities, or outside threats.

As Gregg Crawford wrote in *The Last Link: Closing the Gap that is Sabotaging your Business*, nowadays there is increased pressure to compete in the global economy. Customers are price shopping and demanding faster service. Competition is fierce with more and more players entering the marketplace. The future, he wrote, will be left to “those who can help customers see the value of their solutions, creating expanded sales opportunities with expedited sales cycles that close more profitably”<sup>1</sup>

“Until you uncover the customer’s true needs (as opposed to what he says he wants), clarify how your product or solution provides optimal value for the customer, and understand the constraints your customer operates within,” he said, “you don’t know enough to propose and position the best solution possible. And the best solution is the solution that brings your company closer to meeting its strategic goals.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Uncovering Needs / Accumulating Knowledge**

In most organizations, the best resource available for uncovering those “true needs” is your sales team – the men and women who, by nature of their position, are (or should be) communicating with major players in the market daily.

Because of their proximity to the “playing field” they are the first to know if the “game plan” isn’t working. They hear from the front line why sales are going to competitors, if the price is too high, the turnaround too slow, or if the industry is just plain sagging. The reps are the ones who know if the plays “called down from above” aren’t working.

You hear time and time again that your reps need to be more than order takers – they need to be trusted consultants. No one gets to this level without a depth of industry knowledge.

This knowledge comes from a variety of angles... from listening and taking note of what customers and prospects are saying, to staying in touch with industry trends via social media, industry publications, and in-depth market research.

Good salespeople know that, as Warren Greshes wrote in *The Best Damn Sales Book Ever*, their job “goes way beyond supplying (their) clients with great products and great service. (Their) job is also to provide the client with the knowledge, expertise, information and education they need to be more successful in their career or business.”<sup>2</sup>

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Great salespeople – team players who realize that they can be successful only so long as their company is successful – realize that they also need to be the conduit of information from the front lines. Disconnect happens when knowledge starts and ends with the rep. For a company to retain strategic advantage, any and all information gleaned must be systematically rolled up to management so that if a change in strategy is needed it can be done in a timely and effective manner.

#### *Systems for Success*

Last month we talked about creating a cohesive sales team – giving your team the systems, training and support they need to succeed, setting benchmarks, consistently evaluating progress and keeping the lines of communication between sales and management open. **Just as important is the need to uncover, log and systematically roll up to management information about what is going on in your customer's world.**

Knowledge from the front lines is so critical to the success of your company strategy that reporting should not be left to chance. As with the regular activity logs there must be weekly, monthly and quarterly reports sharing key conversations in the market, meetings with prospects, sales cycles, overall sales pipeline, key major objections, questions that are being asked on a regular basis, and more. This act of collecting and disseminating information must be ingrained in your company. **Set the systems in place, make it a habit, and create a culture of knowledge acquisition and sharing.**

#### *Knowledge = Opportunity*

Knowledge opens up the door for opportunity management. Opportunity management enables companies to effectively qualify prospects.<sup>1</sup>

It also opens up the door for another tactic, Provocative Selling, as defined in a Harvard Business Review article by Philip Lay, Todd Hewlin, and Geoffrey Moore, which states, “Whereas solution-selling salespeople listen for ‘pain points’ that the customer can clearly articulate, provocation works best when it outlines a problem that the customer is experiencing but has not yet put a name to.”<sup>3</sup>

Knowledge also forms the basis for a creating a true customer centric organization — a company culture that is driven by and for the customer. The concept of customer-centricity is a few steps up from age-old “the customer is always right” way of thinking. It focuses on forming long-term, profitable relationships with clients, learning from them and customizing or expanding your company's offerings to meet and anticipate their needs – on “using knowledge of customers to package products and services into solutions that create value for customers”<sup>4</sup>

As organizational design expert, Jay R. Galbraith states, “the new foundation of profitability is the customer relationship.”<sup>4</sup>

#### *Keep Your Eyes On The Horizon*

For those doubting the need to constantly and routinely document conversations in the marketplace, consider Greshes' statement about keeping eyes on the horizon, and reacting to subtle shifts in consumer trends: “You never know where your next big competitor is going to come from, so you better be aware of everyone. ...Twenty-five or 30 years ago, who was Wal-Mart... Do you think 30 years ago, Sears considered Wal-Mart competition? The funny thing is, 30 years later, do you think Wal-Mart considers Sears competition?”<sup>2</sup>

#### *Partner Effectively*

In today's competitive environment it is more important than ever to stay in tune with the market. If your reps are too busy traveling to do adequate market research, or this is something you don't have time or energy to explore, consider outsourcing your sales effort with an experienced, strategic ally who has the leadership, experience and best-in-class systems in place to help take your business to the next level.

<sup>1</sup> Crawford, Gregg. *The Last Link: Closing The Gap That is Sabotaging Your Business*. Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Greshes, Warren. *The Best Damn Sales Book Ever*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Lay, Philip, Todd Hewlin, and Geoffrey Moore. “In a Downturn, Provoke Your Customers.” *Harvard Business Review*, 2009 <http://hbr.org/2009/03/in-a-downturn-provoke-your-customers/ar/1>.

<sup>4</sup> Galbraith, Jay R. *Designing the Customer Centric Organization*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

