Can Itchy and Scratchy be friends? Improving the relationship between sales and marketing

There are two types of factor that affect collaboration between sales and marketing. Those that are out of the control of sales and marketing staff – management attitudes to coordination, interdepartmental culture and structure and orientation, and four that are internal to the interface – inter-functional conflict, communications, market intelligence and learning.

Senior managers play a critical role in influencing this interface, and improving collaboration in the sales and marketing interface should be their focus.

What’s the problem with the sales and marketing interface?

Sales and marketing are meant to be part of the same function – marketing. But there has been a growing realization that this relationship is not always operating as efficiently as it should... Typically, when managers are asked about the operation of the sales and marketing relationship there is laughter, or a shake of the head and a shrug, indicating that it’s not all sweetness and light. The internal interface between sales and marketing would benefit from a greater understanding of its operation and it has only recently started to receive the attention it deserves from academics and management.

Research into market orientation, and marketing and research and development (R&D), has shown that effective internal collaboration brings organizational benefits in terms of improved business performance and customer satisfaction. As the sales and marketing interface has a direct and significant impact on customers it is possibly more important in improving business performance than many other internal interfaces. Nevertheless, there are compelling arguments for maintaining some tension between sales and marketing as their activities require different skills and personalities, and the different perspectives of the two groups may be necessary to maintain efficient/optimum performance.

The existing sales and marketing interface literature has yet to fully characterize the operation of the sales and marketing interface and its antecedents. Neither does it offer solutions of how managers can work to improve the relationship. If these factors can be identified then they may be used to improve collaboration between sales and marketing, thereby assisting organizations to gain advantage in highly competitive environments by providing greater responsiveness to markets. New insights into the complex relationship between sales and marketing, and lessons learnt from the analytical process, may also be applicable to other internal interfaces.

Sales and marketing – the Itchy and Scratchy of corporate interfaces

Like Itchy and Scratchy in The Simpsons, the sales and marketing interface is characterized by feigned friendship, negative outcomes and conflict. A lack of cohesion and poor communication, distrust and dissatisfaction in the interface may
be driven by strong departmental identities, conflicting goals and inter-functional conflict. Differences between sales and marketing perceptions of performance may be a cause of dissatisfaction, and perceived relationship effectiveness is defined in terms of how worthwhile, equitable, productive and satisfying a manager perceives their working relationship to be with another manager.

Recent studies have highlighted that poor cooperation between sales and marketing may be caused by cultural differences, internal conflict and differences in “thought worlds”. It has been suggested that cultural or ingrained differences in the interdepartmental interface may create norms of behaviour such as lack of sharing, but that positive interdepartmental cultures may lead to joint participation and greater collaboration between sales and marketing.

Developing an effective marketing/sales interface can result in a truly market-oriented organization. However, it is unclear how the drivers of the sales and marketing relationship interrelate to create or destroy collaboration in the interface.

Sales and marketing are usually structured and managed as two independent departments in larger organizations, although smaller organizations may have a single department with integrated goals. Many organizations do not have a clear idea how sales and marketing should relate and, critically, there is some doubt that sales and marketing personnel always appreciate the need to work together. This may be aggravated by a lack of understanding about each other's role.

**Some tension can be good**

There are many cogent arguments supporting the organizational separation of sales and marketing. The functions that sales and marketing perform demand different skills and personalities, so separation may be important to retain the distinctiveness of the two functions. In this situation, differences between sales and marketing may have positive effects. Sales staff could play the role of customers' advocate, while marketing promote the interests of products/brand, which could result in market performance being enhanced as each side strives to improve its position. Under these circumstances, integrating sales and marketing may be less advantageous than developing internal role structures that productively utilize tension between the two groups.

Certainly, an organization adopting a market orientation should strive to improve internal relationship to satisfy customer needs, and collaboration, which involves working together for mutual benefit, is a more appropriate concept for the sales and marketing interface than integration. Collaboration should not reduce the necessary differences and tension between the two groups. Improved collaboration between sales and marketing can lead to greater efficiencies and have a positive impact on business performance.

**Management attitudes towards coordination**

Senior managers should be seen to be taking responsibility for the complex relationship between sales and marketing and to improve the willingness of sales and marketing staff to collaborate effectively. One of the factors that may cause difficulties between sales and marketing is that sales targets are often short-term, while marketing targets may be long-term. Attention should be given to better alignment of these different targets, so that they positively contribute to shared objectives, while still retaining the independent views of sales and marketing.

Studies in R&D and marketing found that senior management and representatives from each functional area in successful organizations constantly stressed the value of working together to achieve common goals. A positive senior management attitude
towards cooperation plays a direct and critical role in influencing the internal factors, which in turn may create greater collaboration between sales and marketing. Management attitudes towards coordination may also influence the creation of an appropriate interdepartmental culture.

The interdepartmental culture is the framework within which the sales and marketing interface operates. The four “internal” factors are:

1. inter-functional conflict
2. communications
3. market intelligence, and
4. learning

…ones which sales and marketing staff can directly focus on to improve collaboration, but to be effective will probably need support from senior management.

Senior managers play a critical role in creating an effective sales and marketing interface. This is achieved in two ways:

1. through culture, and
2. through senior management buy-in to the concept of improving the interface.

Senior managers need to work with sales and marketing staff to improve their operational efficiency by focusing on the internal factors in the interface. This should lead to improved collaboration between sales and marketing, which should have a positive influence upon their business performance.

If targets are set jointly then the overall direction and individual contributions to the objective may become explicit, and Itchy and Scratchy can live together in sweet harmony!

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