

Institutionalizing Thought Leadership

Posted At : September 28, 2012 7:21 AM | Posted By : AMZ

Related Categories: Creative Selling

In the Fall of 2001, after the shock wore off and the grief faded, several of my clients started to talk about the opportunities presented by new security and counter terrorism laws passed by Congress. In one week, I sat in meetings at three different technology companies listening to their sales and product people brainstorm solution ideas to help customers implement enhanced security measures. It was standard stuff. Take the widget we have, tweak it and go tell customers it is the answer their prayers. These were all great products and the ideas were solid. And while all three companies experienced an increase in revenue with these new ideas, none of them experienced the breakout performance they expected.

Another client took a very different approach. Unisys invested several months in talking to customers, partners and experts about the implication of everything that had happened on their business. He sent their sales and marketing teams out to customers and hired my firm to conduct C-level executive interviews with non-customers. The conversations were broad, encompassing all the major departments impacted, not just IT. When all the findings were analyzed Unisys learned that customers were rethinking their entire approach to security. Post 9/11 customers understood, most for the first time, the interrelation between security and practically every other aspect of the business. As a result, they were reevaluating how they made decisions and the types of solutions they should be implementing. What customers wanted more than anything was guidance and a partner to help them think through the best way to protect their business, employees and customers. Unisys went on to create the Security Leadership Institute and the Trusted Enterprise Model that took its security solution and services business from \$50 to \$300 million in 36 months.

The Unisys story embodies the cornerstone of Creative Selling from the corporation's point of view. Creating multi-million dollar opportunities starts by listening and learning. Unisys' approach to, and investment in, understanding the full impact of 9/11 is a rarity. Most corporations, and as a result, their sales force, skip this step because they consider themselves experts. They approach thought leadership as something they have to tell the marketplace. They talk a lot about creating thought leadership, but most view it only as a way to package their intellectual property. It tends to be an internally focused exercise rather than market or customer centric. As a result it is often the ultimate in industry-speak with little grounding in a customer's environment. Equally problematic, the thought leadership tends to reside only in the thought leaders.

The problem with that model is threefold. First, it doesn't scale. There are usually only one or two thought leaders in a business unit. The more talented they are, the more they are pulled in multiple directions. The product/service development teams want them in the lab. The marketing department wants them speaking at trade shows and industry events. Executive management wants them briefing the board and Wall Street. The sales force is often the lowest priority. The sales force is also the least likely to demand their time.

Which leads us to the second challenge. Most thought leaders are, at heart, academicians. The white papers they produce are often esoteric and theoretical. Don't misunderstand, their work is brilliant. They even have practical applications. But the practical isn't always grounded in the reality of messy customer environments. The sales force typically only wants them involved when the process shifts to technical evaluations which minimize the impact of the thought leadership on the sale and the customer relationship.

The final challenge is that most thought leadership is too erudite for the sales force to incorporate into its daily pitch. It becomes a bit like the game whisper. By the time the messaging circulates through the customer base it has little resemblance to the original.

The Unisys approach to its thought leadership in the security space worked because it was grounded in the customer environment and Security Leadership Institute board members augmented the activities of Unisys' thought leaders. But even the Unisys story doesn't have a happy ending. As the company's

attention shifted and the commitment to the Security Leadership Institute faded the thought leadership disappeared. Unisys still had a holistic set of solutions that embodied the thought leadership. They were still ahead of the curve in the market for a time, but the sales force was never able to internalize the thought leadership.

I knew the healthcare market [for IT] was going to be big even before the 2009 stimulus and the Affordable Care Act. It's just common sense given the aging population and the increasing costs of care. I felt strongly that my employer at the time needed to develop health care solutions. Our technology was a perfect fit, but I really couldn't make a solid case to management or the product teams. I knew that if I was going to be successful convincing my company to act (or getting a new job in the healthcare vertical) and selling in the new market, I needed to become an expert with a unique perspective. I didn't think of it as thought leadership. I just knew I had a lot to learn and needed a personal competitive differentiator. So I invested in my future. I joined associations, cold called industry experts to pick their brains, read everything I could find and harassed every friend and relative in the industry. After about six months, I passionately believed my company could deliver a simple yet elegant solution that would solve one of the most expensive challenges facing private practice physicians. I also had the confidence and the industry data to back me up. Less than six months later, we launched my idea. But even better, close to 70% of the healthcare professionals I talked to while building my expertise, bought the solution within the first year.

~Tim

To our elite salesman thought leadership isn't something handed down from on high. It is part of his personal brand. He invests in developing his unique point of view regarding the market places within which he works. He has a deep understanding of their opportunities and challenges. He also understands that he needs a unique point of view to separate himself and his company.

Information is ubiquitous these days. All the facts and information the buyer needs is a few clicks away. It's changing the nature of communication between sellers and buyers. The new nature of selling is that you have to be smarter. Regurgitating the company propaganda isn't enough to secure and keep the buyer's attention. Sellers with a vertical focus have an intimate knowledge of the commercial context. ~Larry

...I agree with Larry. A vertical focus is very helpful. But I believe Sellers with a broader understanding of business value are also able to set themselves apart. They are able to set a holistic context and articulate the far-reaching impact of a seemingly discrete purchase. That can completely change the nature of the sales event. ~Joe

Sales people who invest in becoming experts are not unusual. What separates our elite group is that they move beyond being an expert in the particular solution set they sell to become experts in the business opportunities and challenges their target markets face. This gives them a broader perspective and significantly enhanced credibility with the customer. It enables them to align the vision and strategy of their company with that of their customer. They are invited to the table early and often because the customer trusts that they'll add value.

In the next post, we'll discuss how organizations can help sales people become thought leaders.