



High End Technology Sales

Infatuation, dating, romance and marriage

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Sales is a many splintered thing

In one of my more poetic moments, I made the observation that:

Dating is a dance of incremental intimacy. We avoid pain by risking only a little at each stage of courtship.

Certainly this is not the most profound thought ever uttered over cocktails, but it is a fundamental truth. Long-term commitment – the alleged goal of courtship – has such immense ramifications that no sane person would jump into marriage without an extended and incrementally advancing courtship process. Well, nobody outside of Hollywood that is.

With technology sales, the same dynamic applies. The risk of commitment – be it for a new CPU in the laptops made by Hewlett Packard or a new ERP system deployed within General Motors – is huge, and such a commitment is not taken lightly.

Many technology vendors do not grasp this. Frustrated by the slow pace of a sale, they foolishly flatter and grope their prospects like a teenage boy on his first sexual conquest. The results are the same for both – a slap in the face and the end of the courtship.

High-stakes technology selling is like courtship. You must understand each phase, what it means for the other party to open themselves to an increasingly intimate relationship, and why they should or should not commit to a marriage with your company.

“The first thing I noticed was her great personality”

A recent survey reported that the first thing women notice about a romantic prospect is his smile. The second thing they notice is his butt. Who said it was the men that were “visually oriented”?

The first step in modern romantic rituals is the attraction phase. As with dating, the attraction phase is highly superficial and based in our animalistic origins. However, many technology vendors lead their promotional efforts with endless technical feature lists and ROI studies. This is like walking up to a lady in a bar and reciting your resume.

The goal in this phase of a sales effort is to pique the interest of the prospect by appealing to more innate aspects of their being. Appeals to desired outcomes or perceived problems is akin to shaving your beard or strapping on a push-up bra. You are creating titillation as a prelude to the longer courtship process. Don't be a nerd – be a handsome star or a beautiful starlet.

Attraction, as described above, is merely the process of assuring there is mutual interest. If the interest is not mutual, then move on.

The first kiss

When the interest is mutual, avoid the temptation to propose marriage on the first date, or try to close a sale on the first outside sales call. Your potential lover is not ready for that level of intimacy, and instead wants to know more about you – where are you from, what do you do, and how fat is your savings account?

In sales, as in dating, the filtering process is essential. Would you consider marrying someone with radically different religious or political beliefs? Unlikely. Nor would a prospective customer buy your technology unless you as a company and your products meet their preferences.

Your marketing department must prepare materials that address this dating-like interrogation. Prospects will want to know how long you have been in business, what your financial health is like, who your strategic partners are, what core technologies you use, etc. If you cannot answer these questions as well as questions about your products, then you won't get a good night kiss or a second date.

Exclusivity – establishing commitment

I had a girlfriend once who was one of the most honest people on the planet. During our initial dating, she bluntly announced whenever I passed another “test.” “You passed the gym test.” “You passed the gentleman test.” “You passed the kissing test.” Refreshingly disconcerting.

But once I had passed the tests, we slid into a state of happy exclusivity. We were “good enough” for one another and thus discontinued our search for alternate mates while deepening our various intimacies – intellectual intimacy, spiritual intimacy, and other intimacies.

After your technology prospect has agreed that you have “passed some basic tests,” they will form a temporary state of exclusivity. You may be subjected to the rigors of comparative evaluation “pitting” you against other vendors. But more likely than not, if a prospect wants to go “steady” with you, they will let you know plainly enough (if not, then odds are you are being used for other less romantic reasons).

At this point in the relationship, both firms are actively exploring the possibility of a permanent relationship. As in some cultures, family members (people in other functional groups, superiors, etc.) are brought in to help evaluate you as a marriage partner. It is during this time of due diligence when you answer detailed questions concerning your abilities and your prospects – in short, how well you will be able to support the relationship. Family members often have real or functional veto power, so even if you have romanced your primary buyer, you have to wow their parents (bosses), siblings (peer managers) and busybody aunts (department heads).

Popping the question

A stand-up comic once said, “You don't know a woman until you sleep with her. I don't mean

having sex with her. I mean trying to get eight hours a shut-eye with her snoring, stealing your blanket and putting her cold feet on your back. Then, and only then, can you be sure you are ready to propose.”

Only when you are sure you can suffer a long-term relationship with a prospect, and that they can suffer one with you, can you submit a proposal. Popping the question before this level of comfort and intimacy is reached puts them in a defensive posture and can prolong the sales cycle. A prospect won't tell you when the time is right for a proposal. Most often you have to know when it is right for both you and for your prospect. When they have no more questions and have not rejected the relationship (i.e., quit returning phone calls), then a proposal for marriage is in order.

“It was about time he proposed”

I only know of one person who married shortly after he met his bride to be. The marriage ended in disaster, divorce, and wild rumors concerning an exchange of gunfire.

If the dating and sales process seems to be long and torturous affairs, they are that way with good reason. Adopting a technology is a commitment of staggering proportions. Think for a moment about enterprise software. Buyers are committing hundreds or even thousands of their employees to use one piece of technology to improve the fundamental operations of their company. The commitment and risk are substantial.

Thus, the sales process is long and designed to torture you, the technology sales and marketing professional. We all complain about long sales cycles, but when we view the risk of commitment from the prospect's point of view, then this time span appears incredibly short.

If you want to reduce the sales cycle, you have to reduce the customer's risk and/or expedite the dating process. Let's look at each part separately:

Reducing risk

When adopting a new technology, an organization is risking money, time, manpower, and market momentum (i.e., what it could achieve if it were not distracted by implementing your products). If you can reduce the exposure to risk on any or all of these fronts, then you can reduce your sales cycle time. Since reducing the financial risk is detrimental to you and your bonus check, I advise focusing on the other three.

Time: Time is money, and a prospect must invest time in the dating process and in the marriage. Reducing the risk in the dating process means answering the questions in advance, training everyone in your organization that comes in contact with the prospect, and creating products that have short time-to-testing characteristics.

Manpower: People are the most valuable and most expensive resource in any organization. You cannot waste their time either through sales events that add no value, or during product implementation. Increasing your customer's ROI can be done by improving the return, or reducing their investment (risk). If your products will take considerable manpower to acquire, implement or manage, then you need to create a better sales process and a better product.

Market momentum: Every organization needs to move forward. Does your sales process or your product distract your customer's forward progress more than it accelerates it? If so cancel the caterer and the tuxedo rental – the wedding is off. Fix the product so it is less disruptive to the prospect's internal processes, and the sales process will move more quickly. Fix the sales process so that the selection of your technology does not distract your prospect from their fundamental mission.

Expediting the “dating” phases

As in courtship, no phase of the sales process outlined herein can be skipped. “Hello, my name is Guy. Will you marry me?” doesn't work.

The key to expediting each sales phase is to list for each phase the questions and concerns that are voiced, and address them proactively. A customer who has to ask the question first will be a tougher sale (why else would we compose FAQs). A customer who has to wait to get an answer becomes cautious about the relationship and more likely to postpone a wedding/sale. A prospect who cannot get the answers they need will leave you at the altar.

Marriage – happy forever after?

No discussion of romance and sales would be complete without pondering married life. After all, the time spent dating and engaged is nothing compared to the years spent in a marriage. Multiply the effect by ten if it is a bad marriage. As dating has stages that lead to marriage, there are stages that lead to divorce.

Neglect

The end of a relationship with a technology buyers typically begins with neglect, which for many technology vendors begins shortly after the ink is dry on the contract. Like a lonely wife whose workaholic husband never spends time with her or the kids, so too can a customer sense abandonment by a vendor.

A technology relationship extends well beyond the delivery of the product, and well beyond mere technical support. It involves listening and empathizing with your customers over their changing needs. Your sales and marketing teams needs to spend time with customers as an on-going process to learn about their businesses and growing pains. Not only does this keep the relationship alive, it alerts you to changing needs that are common to new prospects as well.

Estrangement

If a technology relationship decays, the buyers will begin cheating on you. As they explore new technology and new vendors, they are establishing their willingness to consider divorce. The symptoms are varied, but it often first appears in the changing scope and nature of technical support calls and up-selling opportunities. When once happy customers become distant, then they are having a change of heart.

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Irreconcilable differences

If let to decay further, your customer will file for divorce. The grounds are always “irreconcilable differences”. The gap between their needs and your ability to respond to their needs has grown so large that they no longer consider your firm or your technology to be a good match. As frightening as dating is to married people, it is a lot better than suffering a bad marriage. If a technology or its provider are not a full partner in the relationship, then the buyer is better off finding a more suitable partner.

“After the divorce I ended up without a dime”

Much has been written about relationships as a foundation to business. Millions have been invested (or wasted) in implementing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) packages. The situation is both worse and better than the pundits report.

The key to sales success or a technology marriage is knowing how your prospect minimizes the risk by minimizing the commitment during the sales process. Work on reducing the risk and you accelerate the sales cycle. Work on maintaining a healthy relationship after sales and you shorten new sales opportunities and up-sale opportunities as well.

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