

Marketing Communications as Product Development: Building the Portable Salesperson

...and sales trainer!

Because even though the best salespeople may *seem* to be, they're not superhuman.

One, they can only interact with so many people, and each one so many times.

(Same with you, me, or anyone else, right?)

Two. Business-to-business sales professionals obviously excel at explaining complex product & service offerings clearly. But it's hard to communicate clearly when what you're supposed to communicate isn't clear to YOU.

(Same with you, me, or anyone else, right?)

Which means your marketing communications must...

1. Be as clear, specific, and compelling as a salesperson—so that they can do some of what a good salesperson would do.

That is: While a good marketing piece can't actually *converse* with someone, it shows *understanding*.

And understanding is the start of, and fuel behind, a trusting relationship.

2. Help your salespeople be clear, specific, and compelling in the first place.

Put another way...

What's the difference between good and not-quite-so-good marketing communications?

It's the difference between a sales force that can extend itself as far as possible...and one that can't.

The People Who Sell for You—and the People Who Could...

When your marketing materials meet the standard of “portable salesperson,” you do more than help your sales force.

You grow your sales force.

So how does it play out? On top of your sales force, consider the people who sell for you and the people who could sell for you...

1. Your partners—whether those that distribute, customize, or repackage your products and services or those that supply a component OF your products and services.

What partners do you have—and what partners do you *want* to have? How will a relationship with you help them: Better meet their customers' needs? Increase profit per customer? Attract *new* customers? Expand into new markets? Or...?

If your marketing communications make that crystal clear, they'll listen.

And, because your partners can then incorporate your marketing copy into their own selling materials, the work you've already done will then get *others* to want to listen.

[Now yes...I haven't mentioned incentives, contracts, logistics, and so forth. Your “portable salespeople” just get the ball rolling!]

2. Your colleagues—in your company, in the channel, near...and far.

Think of those who work at your organization—or for your partners—who are far removed from product management, client services, marketing, or sales.

Far removed or not, you can guess they get the “So what does your company do?” question with some frequency.

They *want* to respond clearly and specifically. But can they? Is it easier to just be vague? (And turn the conversation elsewhere?)

If yes, that's certainly a missed opportunity.

But there are bigger missed opportunities.

What if someone expresses to one of your colleagues a need for what your company provides?

Given the complexity and cost of your company's offerings, it's not going to be a direct question ("We need an HR services vendor, know anyone?").

It'll be more like: "Do you believe we need to hire and train hundreds of people around the world over the next few years? Exciting times, but..."

Would your colleagues pick up on this?

If they've seen good marketing materials—marketing materials they're happy to have read!—chances are they will pick up on it. Your *portable* salespeople will have created *flesh-and-blood* salespeople.

Otherwise...the missed opportunities will add up.

3. Friends and families—Yours, your colleagues, your channel partners'...

The question "Would you be able to explain what you do to your grandmother?" is *just* as relevant when you're talking about multifaceted, million-dollar-price-tag business-to-business products & services.

Because "your grandmother" may know or speak with someone who turns out to be...your prospect!

Or someone who knows your prospect.

Or someone who might *influence* your prospect (more on this in a minute).

And when your channel partners and colleagues near & far can speak about you in a clear and specific way to their friends and families, their friends and families will *also* be able to speak about you in a clear and specific way. They'll be able to act on the kinds of opportunities we've described.

And a sales cycle begins that might not have begun otherwise.

Or... a sales cycle that's been stalled gets new life, because someone else

at your prospect company gets into the mix. Someone you or your sales force didn't know or couldn't or wouldn't have reached.

All because a friend or family member of *someone* knows enough about you to have said the right thing to the right person at the right time.

All tied back to clear and specific marketing communications.

4. Your prospects themselves.

On the same note: You of course don't just have one prospect in any given company. Many people will influence whether you are considered.

Every prospect needs to speak on your behalf whenever the opportunity arises. And you won't necessarily know *when* that happens because you aren't and *can't* be there all the time.

(And, uh, your prospects wouldn't exactly *want* you to be, would they?)

And that's okay...because you want every prospect to *want* to speak on your behalf. Considering you're a tad biased about yourself, it's better coming from *them* than you, right?

And that can only happen when a good marketing piece sits in their subconscious—whether that marketing piece communicates new information or reiterates what a sales rep has already communicated in person.

5. The “influencers”: Media, industry analysts, bloggers...

If you're lucky, influencers are seeking you out—you just won't necessarily know it!

That is, journalists, analysts, bloggers, and others might not care about you at the moment you want them to.

But when they do, they'll of course do their own research on you. They'll go to your website. They'll read the copy. They'll download your brochures, white papers, case studies. They want to better understand the context creating a need for companies like yours. Because that's what their readers—your prospects!—expect from them.

And if they don't have to interpret and translate what you're trying to say, they'll be more likely to talk about you the way you want to be talked about.

They'll be more likely to talk about you, period.

Meet a Portable Salesperson

Imagine this is the introduction to your company's main brochure (let's call this "Sales Copy A"):

Market research and data collection doesn't need to put a strain on your resources. We are a full-service market research and data processing company that provides all of the following services...

(...With a long list of all your services following)

Now imagine THIS is your introduction (let's call it "Sales Copy B"...I've condensed it where noted):

Whether it's conducting survey research, performing telephone interviews, or simply distributing and compiling forms, making the right business and organizational decisions requires collecting data, sometimes at a large scale.

A few specific illustrations among many:

Human Resources Departments: Administering tests, questionnaires, evaluations, and performance reviews for staff and management

Customer Service Departments: Running an ongoing customer feedback program (from warranty programs to loyalty programs)

Small and Start-Up Businesses: Performing studies that aim to uncover unmet market needs

(...four other illustrations noted)

Whatever your specific data collection project, you want (and likely need) to gather and act on the data as quickly as possible. But the logistical portion requires knowledge and time your organization may not have.

This usually includes:

- 1. Designing forms and surveys that have a professional look and feel.*
- 2. Translating and adapting forms and surveys for international audiences, when applicable.*

(...four additional logistical activities noted)

Consider how much time you and your staff spend on these tasks, and how much time this takes away from other work. And given your need to have information quickly, consider what that delay is costing. As time passes, data becomes less meaningful and so the decisions based on that data become less sound.

Equally important: Beyond the logistical components of data collection, you need to ensure you have the expertise to determine what data you need, what methodologies and approaches should be used to gather it, and how to conduct the rigorous analysis required to decipher meaningful conclusions.

Sentenium can help...

("Sales Copy B" is ©2005-2008 Sentenium. I was the writer.)

What's wrong with **Sales Copy A**?

It assumes the reader is already familiar with the topic, whoever that reader might be.

If that reader is a *prospect*, it assumes she's thought about it enough or done it enough to conclude that, hmm, my resources are strained.

It assumes in this situation she defines "strained resources" the same way you do.

It assumes she knows she needs exactly what you offer.

Even if all of the above is true (congratulations!), you're still at a disadvantage...because other vendors do exactly what you do and their marketing materials may say exactly what you say! ("We are a full-service...").

So, best case scenario, you start out in the same place as everyone else. Your sales cycle isn't going to be any shorter. The pricing you negotiate isn't going to be any more favorable!

Sales Copy B, on the other hand, takes the reader into the customer's world.

And by doing so, it speaks to ALL readers, your prospects *and* everyone else—from the sales rep who needs to get up to speed so he can *speak* to that prospect...to your aunt June.

But everything about you is still in there! Looking through the eyes of your reader, you've talked about the role of everything you do while making it clear how it all works together to form one compelling whole.

Which means that in the eyes of your reader, you seem more credible. You seem like the kind of vendor that "gets it." The kind of vendor that can be relied on. The kind of vendor that's less of a risk to recommend or buy from.

Yes, you'll still have a long way to go. But you've put yourself ahead.

Just like a good salesperson.

The Portable Salesperson: Your "Product Requirements"

The notion of the portable salesperson illuminates a universal truth...

Like the products & services your marketing communications are selling, your marketing communications are themselves products & services. Products & services meant to meet the needs of their "target markets"—in this case, you, your sales force, your partners, your prospects, your friends & family, everyone who may have the opportunity to sell for you.

And just like product development, your marketing communications will go through "prototypes" before they're suitable for their target markets.

So what does it take to build a portable salesperson?

Just like an engineer, you follow a set of a "product requirements." In this case, five connected ones...

Product requirement #1. Talk about your customer's life in such a way that what you *do* for that customer "fits" perfectly—just as a frame fits its painting.

"Framing" is the most challenging part of the job. Just like Sales Copy B: You have to be narrow enough to show you truly understand your customer while broad enough to not leave anything out!

Put another way: **If you can't frame it right, you can't sell it right!**

Product requirement #2. Communicate—with specificity, with *illustration*—how your products & services fit into your customer's life and what they do.

Going back to Sales Copy B...if you've "framed it right," you've already done a lot of the thinking. You've already talked about your customer's life in a descriptive way, in a way that appeals to emotion and to logic. You've already established how you're going to talk about your products & services...now you'll go into further detail.

Product requirement #3. Make it easy to read.

Just like any "product": If a marketing piece doesn't do its job, people won't "buy" it.

And so a marketing piece that doesn't get read and absorbed is a defective product!

Just like a good salesperson carefully chooses her words (without making it SOUND like she does!), you need to carefully construct the phrasing of each sentence and the flow from one sentence and paragraph to the next.

And...the look of the text! For example, think of marketing materials you've seen that were chock full of big blocks of text. Long paragraph, long paragraph, another long paragraph...

Unintentionally (I hope!) these materials shout, "Don't read me!" The reader flinches. His eyes dart away. He moves on...

Of course, you've probably *also* seen materials with text that's appealing to the eye and ear...and yet...it's for naught. Because it doesn't

communicate what it needs to. (Like Sales Copy A: “Market research and data collection doesn’t need to put a strain on your resources.”)

So making your marketing communications easy to read and absorb *starts* with product requirements 1 and 2.

Product requirement #4. All people involved in creating the portable salesperson need to be united under product requirements 1-3.

A real-life salesperson has to meet these requirements every day...so all involved in creating a portable salesperson must commit to that same standard.

Anything less and, again, you’re putting yourself in the same boat as everyone else. (At best!)

Then, *being* united under product requirements 1-3, all people involved in creating the portable salesperson must serve as “**reality checks**” on each other.

Here’s how it works.

Imagine two people are involved in creating a new brochure. One is the expert on the product or service offering. The other is responsible for the writing.

[There may be more people, of course. But, whatever the number, every person on such a team falls into one of these two categories—they’re either responsible for giving information or responsible for articulating it on paper.]

On one hand, the writer must press the expert, just as a prospect would press a salesperson. Being less close to the product & service offering being sold, the writer’s most important job is to ask lots of “dumb” questions:

“Okay, generally speaking, from what you say I understand why having that would be a good thing. But how would that part of your offering work day to day, in the customer’s life? What makes that compelling enough for someone to want to deal with the cost and uncertainty of change? Illustrate it for me step by step.”

“Wait, but how does what you said about *that* part of your offering connect to what you said about the *other* part of your offering? Clarify for me...”

“But in response to that could the customer say...this?”

“Wait, so what’s the difference between this new part of your offering and what you say you do now? From what I’ve read, for me it’s hard to tell. Clarify for me...”

Then, once the writer chews over everything and puts together a first draft (the first “prototype”), the roles switch.

Having spent much time behind the scenes thinking, rethinking, writing, and rewriting, the writer needs a fresh eye from someone less close to THIS product.

Having that fresh eye, the expert may notice what the writer might not.

And so, after closely reviewing the first “prototype,” the expert must press the writer—asking questions about the writer’s thought process and giving detailed, specific feedback...detailed, specific feedback grounded in product requirements 1-3.

Roles switch again, as the writer can give a fresh perspective on the expert’s feedback. (“That’s a great point...though would this mean we have to...? If so, should we...?”)

And so it continues. Roles switch back and forth. The initial prototype leads to better and *better* prototypes. And ultimately, a marketing piece results that’s worthy of being called a portable salesperson.

(And the writer and expert toast each other!)

Product requirement #5: In service of product requirements 1-4, all people involved in creating the portable salesperson must force themselves to let go of what they hold dear—when not doing so would likely hold back a positive return on investment.

This is something I have to do all the time, so believe me, I know!

For example, back to our “fine print” about product requirement #3: I’ve written copy that reads nicely...dare I say beautifully...but I have to admit

to myself that, for what needs to be accomplished, it hinders rather than helps.

Even after I play with it and play with it some more, I have to conclude that while it could work well in another context, in this context it doesn't. It just doesn't. Time to go back to the drawing board, Mike!

All that said...I know "letting go of what you hold dear" is easier said than done, especially in larger organizations.

It may (okay, probably WILL!) involve twisting a few arms.

As in my example of myself, your own could be the first!

But if you don't twist arms at THIS stage, your target markets for your "product" are going to do it later. (In a manner of speaking.)

And when they do it it'll be a lot more painful.

When they do it it'll be in the form of seeing you as less credible than you are. In the form of seeing you like everyone else. In the form of not understanding exactly what you do.

In the form of not even giving you the time of day.

Don't take the risk.

But the point is, in the process you realize that—just with my own story—what you held dear at one point isn't something you should hold dear now. And so you're glad your arm got twisted.

The Portable Salesperson: Earning its Keep

"The portable salesperson" both confirms and tweaks the way you may think about your marketing communications.

How "tweaks"?

Because no longer are you just writing a lead generation email. A new or updated section of a website. A press release. An ad. A brochure. Or a white paper.

Each may have its own purpose at a given time, yes.

But the harder the thinking you put into *one* of them, the higher the standard you aim for, the time you spend getting it right...the more usable it will be across all your “target markets.”

The more likely your target markets will make it spread.

And the easier it will then be for you when you do others.

And it's necessary, because just like a salesperson, a marketing piece must be able to adapt:

1. It needs to adapt to all the different people who may have opportunities to sell for you. At a basic level, a marketing piece that's out there in the world needs to be as clear to your friends & family as it is to you.
2. It needs to be adaptable itself.

Consider what happens when you write something for a brochure that, like Sales Copy B, lays out the context your company fits into.

Having followed the product requirements, you know people will understand it. It means something. Others will understand it, and identify with it.

And so you (and they!) can use it again and again.

Maybe you'll take what you've done and, for the purpose of an ad, sales letter, email, or video, express the same idea with fewer words. Or tweak the tone.

Maybe you'll expand on it—for your website, for an article, for your next white paper.

Maybe you'll use parts of it verbatim.

Maybe you'll use ALL of it verbatim.

Rather than a disposable salesperson...you've built a portable one!

Conclusion: The Liberation of the Written Word

When we take a step up, the idea of the portable salesperson—of marketing communications as product development—tells us something more.

It illuminates another universal truth...

Treating marketing communications as product development means marketing communications can improve your actual product development!

How?

The liberation of the written word.

Which in this context is a fancy way of saying: You don't truly understand something until you can explain it on paper.

"If you can't frame it right, you can't sell it right"...and in the process you may bring further clarity to what you're selling in the first place. Certain components of your product or service offering may not fit as well as you thought. Certain components may fit better!

Build a portable salesperson and your hard work pays dividends long after you've put in the time.

Now THAT'S a liberating thought!

About the author: Business-to-business companies with complex product & service offerings hire **Mike O'Sullivan** to help them build portable salespeople. Visit www.mikeos.com to see portable salespeople Mike has created and to read what his clients say about him.