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Value creation through the integration of sales and marketing: **SMARTETING**



DIVA – Towards smart sales through creating value in business-to-business markets in digitalized world

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Value creation through the integration of sales and marketing: Smarketing

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Foreword

■ This article deals with value creation through the integration of sales and marketing in business-to-business sales. With research funding from the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (TEKES), five companies and four research institutions formed the DIVA project (www.divaresearch.fi/diva). The project sought to understand and support the business-to-business customer's journey through the purchasing process, to understand the customer's online experiences, to find new ways to affect customers online, and to integrate marketing and sales in view of changed customer behavior.

1

How can we support business-to-business customers' value creation in a digitalized world?

■ The emergence of new digitalized tools has had a radical impact on both business-to-consumer (btoc) and business-to-business (btob) customers' buying behavior. Many service providers are struggling to meet the new expectations customers have. In this paper, we focus on understanding btob customers in an increasingly digital world. Modern btob buyers have very different ways of searching for information and communicating with service providers to support their buying decisions.

Sales used to be about selling services and products and the btob seller was both a product information specialist and an order-taker. However, fueled by new waves of digitalization, business customers are increasingly empowered by information and it is critical for service providers to communicate relevant content about their offering through different channels. In the 21st century, selling has transformed into a strategic activity where it converges with marketing and aims at building and maintaining long-term relationships with the customer. Salespeople are more often involved in value-based selling, where they collaboratively solve problems with customers and seek to provide meaningful value in every customer interaction (Storbacka, Ryals, Davies & Nenonen 2009).

Digitalization has changed the overall way in which customers and service providers interact with each other, as customers engage with firms and their digital channels through various new touchpoints (Kannan & Li 2017; Straker, Wrigley & Rosemann 2015; Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Overall, btob companies use digital channels and social media to attract new customers, interact with suppliers, build relationships, increase awareness, communicate their brand online and receive feedback (Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides 2011). Salespeople can no longer rely solely



on their interpersonal contacts in customer relationship building but need to consider digital channels as additional and parallel touchpoints for initiating and maintaining customer relationships (Heinonen & Michelson 2010). Mobile Internet, social media and other new technologies have changed the overall intensity of customer and service provider interaction. Customers can communicate with salespeople and peer customers through various technology-mediated channels and platforms. In addition, customers can use self-service technologies to handle such tasks that used to require contacting the company's salespeople (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree & Bitner 2000).

The responsibilities of sales and marketing professionals have also changed. Product information, previously kept by salespeople, is now made available for customers in various online channels administered by marketing or customer service. By creating relevant content for different channels, marketing helps customers identify their problems, become interested in a company's offering and move on with their customer journeys. Marketing often also gets the first contacts from potential customers searching for information online, who are then sent forward to salespeople, who start building a relationship with them. (Storbacka et al. 2016.) According to Rawson, Duncan & Jones (2013), companies need to identify key customer journeys, and then engage the entire organization in redesigning the customer experience. This requires shifting from siloed to cross-functional approaches where marketing, sales and product development work for the same customer experience and changing from a touchpoint to a journey orientation.

Sales should be viewed from a new perspective. Customers can no longer be expected to match the service provider's logic, but the service provider needs to work on understanding the customer's logic instead. The emphasis should be on trying to match the service provider's capabilities and resources with the customer's tasks and goals. The increasing focus on customer experience arises because customers now interact with firms through multiple touchpoints in different channels and media, resulting in more complex customer journeys. (Heinonen & Strandvik 2015.)

What with the changed circumstances in btob sales, the DIVA project undertook the challenge to

- develop new insights, competencies, and methods to understand and support the customer's journey through all phases of the purchasing process

- understand the btob customer's online experiences
- create new insights into the methods of affecting btob customers online
- integrate marketing and sales based on a deep understanding of the changed customer behavior in btob sales.

To provide solutions and new insights into the challenges driven by the transformation of customer behavior in btob sales, the DIVA project researched how value is created in digital channels and in the subsequent encounters. Customer understanding was gathered by conducting an online survey among 2000 customers and by interviewing 60 btob buyers in different phases of the buying journey. On top of that, the use of digital sales tools, such as sales robots, to support the btob buying process was prototyped with the partner companies of the project.

This paper combines results from the DIVA research with findings from other relevant sources to shed light on btob buyers' expectations at different points of the customer journey. It also gives suggestions on how organizations could make use of these new opportunities to co-create value in digital channels with customers. The importance of viewing sales and marketing as one function, **smarketing**, is analyzed from both a theoretical and an empirical point of view. The second chapter of this paper discusses the customer journey and buyers' expectations. The following chapter goes into the role of social media and content creation in btob sales. The fourth chapter looks at how to make use of sales meetings as a platform for innovations. The fifth chapter discusses the role of sales robots and online chats in the sales process. The sixth and final part gives recommendations for sales professionals on how to move towards smart sales.

2

The importance of understanding the customer journey to provide an excellent customer experience



■ To improve customer experience, sellers must understand the changing customer behavior and customers' expectations towards sellers. Advances in information technology (IT), social media and digital communication channels are changing the interaction between btob buyers and sellers (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016) and, consequently, customer journeys have become complex and non-linear, with multiple touchpoints. Customer experience, consisting of customer journeys and touchpoints, is a hot topic among practitioners and scholars at the moment (Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

Creating a strong customer experience is a leading managerial objective of both btoc and btob companies (cf. Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Positive, personal and sincere experiences drive customer engagement to a company, a service or a brand (Islam & Rahman 2016). Customer experience affects the customer's loyalty directly and thus helps companies generate more sales revenue. In the current markets, characterized by strong competition, positive customer experiences are particularly important.

In brief, the term **customer experience** describes what the customer experiences when contacting the company. It can be seen as the evolution of a person's sensorial, affective, cognitive, relational, and behavioral responses to a company or brand relating to a journey of touchpoints a person goes through at pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl 2017). A touchpoint, on the other hand, is the point of contact or each interaction a customer has with the company. Touchpoints can be defined as "critical moments when customers interact

with the organization and its offering on the way to purchase and after” (Rawson et al. 2013).

Business customers do not usually buy on a whim, but they consider their purchases. Several behavioral scientists (e.g. Hauser 2014; Payne 1982; Simon 1955) have revealed that individuals’ decision-making process has two primary stages. In the first stage, they create a “loose” consideration set of possible products or services that would fulfill their needs. This means that they search for alternative products or services without tight evaluation and exact accuracy related to their needs. In the second phase, they select a limited number of options of products or services that they consider more carefully. Research on decision-making has shown that individuals balance effort and accuracy in relation to the tasks and demands.

The **customer journey** depicts the process of how the customer engages with a company. It can be divided into three stages: awareness – a customer becomes aware of the problem or the need; consideration – a customer initiates an information search and an evaluation of alternatives; purchase – a customer makes a purchase decision. In the DIVA project, we defined the customer journey as the journey the buyer goes through in the awareness, consideration and decision stages consisting of digital and physical touchpoints. Buyers research, evaluate, select and share experiences about the product and the supplier more than ever before (Lingqvist, Plotkin & Stanley 2015). The change in buyer behavior requires sellers to react to the new situation by adjusting their selling processes according to the customer journey, in particular, to the steps before the actual transaction.

2.1 Btob buyers expect easiness, promptness and personalization

The interviews conducted during the DIVA project brought out some major expectations that btob buyers have towards the selling company during the buying process. Easiness was mentioned many times and seemed to be an important factor in helping the customer move forward in the buying process. Easiness means that btob buyers expect easy access to the company’s contact information and to chat services. They want to be able to send emails to the seller, have access to tools to compare different offers,

and find clear price information and product descriptions. On the other hand, they perceive unclear websites as irritating and think that they slow down their buying processes. In the interviews, one customer stated that

“It is sometimes difficult to find an e-mail address, filling in the form may take more than twice the time compared to sending an e-mail.”

Buyers appreciate promptness from the seller’s side and want a quick reaction to their issues within 24 hours. One buyer said the following:

“Number one on the seller side is the response time; 24 h is the absolute limit.”

Sales robots and chat services are appreciated, as they make the sales process faster. Buyers also expect personalized services and do not want to be treated anonymously in digital channels. The relationship is important and buyers would like the same contact person to serve them at the different stages of the buying process. In the interviews, one customer commented as follows:

“Regardless of the digital age, I want personal service, I don’t leave any message in any customer service. In each company, I have a certain person who answers my call.”

2.2 Offline versus online buyers

In our research, two extremes of contemporary btob buying behavior could be recognized: **online and offline buyers**. However, efficient use of working time and rational decision-making drive both buyer types. No relation to age, sex and education could be found. Offline buyers were the majority. They prefer personal communication in their interaction. On the one hand, they are active users of search engines (Google) and supplier websites, but, on the other hand, they regard social media as a waste of time due to the flood of information and prefer to separate private and business online presence. One customer said in our interviews that

“At this moment, in this industry, I don’t recognize the value of social media.”

Offline buyers prefer telephoning, email or person-to-person meetings as communication tools. The salesperson with his/her expertise is a key to help the buyer make the decision and to be convinced of the trustworthiness of the supplier. A buyer explained this in the following way:

“A live contact with the person is the most important thing, especially in technical services like these. You need an understanding of what is needed.”

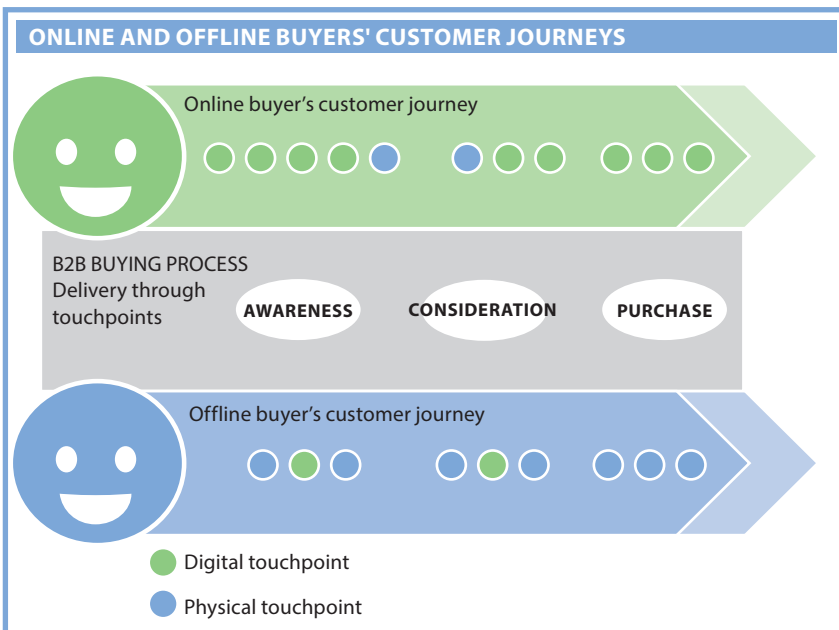


Figure 1. Online and offline buyers' customer journeys. (Modified from Kock & Rantala 2017).

As seen in Figure 1, online buyers prefer information searching, supplier selection and final decision-making in digital channels. Social media creates value to them: they get new ideas, contacts to sellers, and experiences of other buyers, even without necessarily being active in content sharing themselves. However, they prefer meeting the salesperson face to face for the first time. After that, they have a positive attitude towards virtual meetings. Online buyers also expect that sellers can meet them in those touchpoints that the buyers themselves prefer.

These results resonate well with the research conducted by Nakano and Kondo (2018) and Wang, Yang, Song and Sia (2014), who classify customers to different segments based on their attitude and preference towards different digital channels. Thus, companies need to have a strong digital presence in different channels, as customers are searching for information in several digital channels from search engines and social media to brand-owned websites.

3

Social selling and content marketing in the btob buying process



■ Due to market fragmentation, companies are moving away from mass marketing, with some companies even skipping traditional media totally. Instead of creating generic advertisements in different channels, content marketers “create, inspire and share brand messages and conversations with and among customers across a fluid mix of paid, owned, earned and shared communication channels” (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris & Piercy 2017, 411). Holliman and Rowley (2014) define content marketing for the btob setting as follows: “B2B digital content marketing involves creating, distributing, and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business-building outcome.” Social selling offers sellers new possibilities to incorporate the use of social media in customer interactions and is found to have a positive impact on how salespersons communicate information. (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu & Krush 2016).

Customers’ awareness, interest and desire towards new opportunities develop gradually, and they often use many digital channels before the purchase decision. Personalized advertisements, expert blogs, online catalogs and demonstration videos are some of the methods used to promote customers’ awareness of opportunities. Modern digital technology can personalize content seen by customers based on the prior navigation history saved in the cookies of web browsers. When the customer has become aware of something, s/he might become interested and want more information. S/he can use a search engine and type keywords such as “experiences iPhone X” to find relevant content, post a question to a social media site or engage other users in a discussion forum. Today, searching for ad-

ditional information is quite easy due to the ubiquitous digital communication and advanced search engines.

From the customer's perspective, the key issue of digital content marketing is the content itself and the quality of the content. Rieh (2002) suggests that information quality relates to aspects such as usefulness, goodness, accuracy, currency and importance. In addition, users evaluate the quality of the information based on the credibility of the content, the credibility of the site, predictive relevance and veracity (Fink-Shamit & Bar-Ilan 2008). By sharing relevant and up-to-date information with the customer, the seller can create value to the customer and enhance the quality of the business relationship. Holliman and Rowley (2014) emphasize creating "great" content, which helps customers improve their performance and solve their problems.

Content marketing and social media marketing are interrelated. The business objectives of both content marketing and social media marketing are comparable and both emphasize the concept of storytelling rather than promotional communications (Hennig-Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy & Skiera 2010; Järvinen & Taiminen 2016). Furthermore, social media channels can be used to share content. Lacka & Chong (2016) found that, in the btob context, the adoption and use of social media sites depends on marketers' perception of the usefulness, usability and utility of social media sites. Although there is initial reluctance among btob marketers to adopt and use social media sites for marketing due to the nature of interactions between business partners and the perceived irrelevance for the time being, social media, the Internet and other technology-enabled tools will also have a growing importance in the btob context in the future (Dixon & Tanner 2012; Lacka & Chong 2016; Michaelidou et al. 2011).

3.1 A new way of prospecting

Prospecting is the first step of the btob sales process. It is a systematic way of searching for, identifying and locating potential customers, prospects, who meet the qualification criteria defined by the sales management. Finding new customers is a corner stone of a sales strategy to replace customers lost over time. One of the traditional key tools of prospecting has been cold calling, which refers to calling, by phone or a personal visit, potential new customers without prior contact. In recent years, cold calling

has been criticized by both scholars and practitioners as being an ineffective and even frustrating selling tool because customers may feel uncomfortable being interrupted by unknown salespeople.

On the other hand, the development of digital communications and information technology has enabled the emergence of new ways of prospecting and interacting with customers, such as content marketing, which helps potential as well as established customers solve their business problems. Content marketing can improve salespeople's qualification process of potential customers, as the Internet is an initial source of information for btob buyers during the early stages of the buying process (Wiersema 2013). Creating and delivering interesting and relevant content to target buyers attracts potential customers to company websites and motivates them to identify themselves (Holliman & Rowley 2014; Järvinen & Taiminen 2016).

The content strategy of a company is traditionally in the hands of marketing but the alignment of marketing and sales is essential to meet revenue goals. However, the isolation of marketing and sales systems continues to be an endless discussion topic among both scholars and practitioners, as it decreases the efficiency of marketing and sales organizations (cf. Homburg, Kuester, Beutin & Menon 2005; Wiersema 2013).

3.2 Use of social media in the btob customer journey

Innovations have led to new technology-based communication channels and revolutionized the way customers interact and engage with companies (Straker et al. 2015). Btob buying and selling is therefore changing, as customers are claimed not to need salespeople in the way they used to (Adamson, Dixon & Toman 2012). At present, customers can use a wide variety of digital channels and self-service technologies for 24/7 online connectivity. Our survey results in the DIVA project, however, show that, at present, digital channels are mainly an additional and parallel communication channel for business customers, and the use of digital channels in the btob customer journey is very much driven by the needs, habits and preferences of the customer (compare with the online and offline buyer journeys presented in chapter 2.2 and in Figure 1).

Our results also show that social media channels such as LinkedIn, Facebook and other social touchpoints, defined as two-way touchpoints that enable posting and responding to comments directly and in real time (Straker et al. 2015), are of little importance for the majority of btob customers. Instead, functional touchpoints, including company and brand websites, email communication, and newsletters with information content, are more crucial for the majority of btob customers. Overall, business customers may be active users of digital channels and social media when they are off duty, but it seems that only a minority of business customers find social media useful for their btob customer journeys.

Our findings resonate with a UK study which found that a half of btob buyers made no use of social media (Buyersphere Report 2015). In addition, social media may pose a confidentiality risk. Buyers and sellers want to prevent content from falling into competitors' use and all companies are not ready to engage in more open communication (Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi 2015). However, social media is advancing slowly into the buying process and thus sellers also need a social media strategy to avoid a discontinuation of the customer journey.

4

Interaction in sales meetings may promote innovations



■ Selling means constant interaction with customers and salespeople accumulate a lot of valuable information on customers' processes and challenges. The seller and the customer often co-create solutions for the customer's problem and sometimes even end up developing an entirely new kind of service. However, most of the insights learned during the sales meeting stay between the salesperson and the customer. There is reason to believe that sales meetings could be used better to promote innovations.

The trend towards value-based selling and co-creation of value with customers may promote the recognition of innovations. Innovations are new ideas that can be commercialized and that are significantly better than earlier solutions. They can relate to products, services, technologies, business and organizational models, operational processes, or operational methods (Paasi, Valkokari, Hytönen, Huhtilainen & Nystén-Haarala 2013). Sales discussions are transforming from traditional transactional selling events to dialogues where salespeople listen to customers more closely and co-create applied solutions with them. So-called value-based selling is founded on a deep understanding of the customer's situation and the target is to create added value for the customer's business. Information gathered in such sales meetings could be used to promote developing new products and services as well as achieving a more extensive customer understanding.

4.1 Opening up the innovation process

In the literature on innovation management, there are two main concepts to describe innovation with customers: the concept of user innovation (von Hippel 2005) and the concept of open innovation (Chesbrough 2006). The concept of user innovation was based on real life situations in which individual consumers were involved in designing high-end products that would satisfy their needs. Much of the user innovation theory is

also valid in btob markets. The concept of open innovation was born from findings in btob markets where companies were searching for external ideas and technologies to enhance their innovation and for external paths to commercialize their own ideas and technologies.

The change of innovation logic from closed to open is described by the concepts of user and open innovation. In the marketing literature, service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch 2004) also presents a similar change of logic. A transformation towards increasing customer orientation and a service-dominant logic (SDL), away from a goods-centered dominant logic (GDL), is ongoing in companies.

4.2 Sales meetings as a platform for innovation

According to Grönroos and Voima (2013), value can be created in three different spheres. This is illustrated in Figure 2. These spheres (seller/provider, joint and customer) categorize the company's and the customer's actions, which can be direct or indirect, and can lead to different forms of value creation and co-creation. The seller may also act as a value facilitator, which is often the case in value-based selling, where the customer's needs may not be clear beforehand, and they have to be clarified together. Interactions in the joint sphere may promote co-created value.

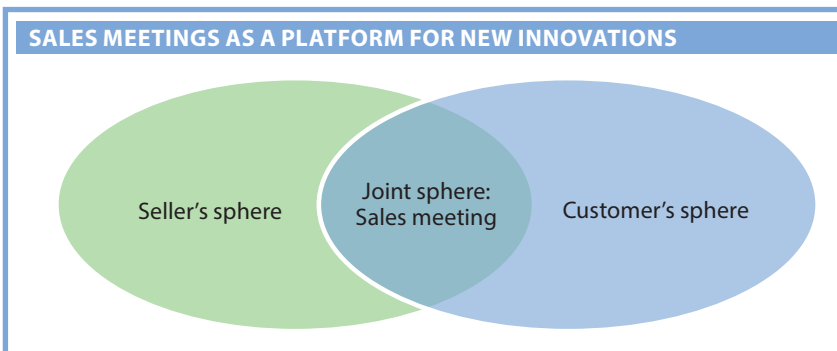


Figure 2. Sales meetings as a platform for innovations (modified from Grönroos & Voima 2013).

The joint sphere seen in Figure 2 can also represent the sales meeting, where digital channels and social media bring diversity and diverse communication between the seller and the customer. New innovations may emerge bidirectionally in sales meetings, as both the salesperson and the customer may act as initiators to open a discussion for new ideas. The customer may bring up unsolved problems or seeds for an innovation in a discussion with the salesperson during the meeting. Triggers can be based on the customer's problems or changing needs. In the DIVA project interviews, one sales representative said:

“Our salespeople discuss with our customers and we try to develop features that will meet their changed needs.”

However, the customer's need to succeed in competitive markets may also originate from internal triggers for acting in new ways, such as the need to improve performance or achieve savings in the cost structure. One buyer described the situation as follows:

“The processes we previously carried out manually need to be developed to become more effective and efficient. We will then start to develop a new way of doing them and to discuss the alternatives the suppliers can offer. Such machines don't exist as such – they have to be created for us.”

4.3 Utilizing new ideas

Utilizing new ideas from sales meetings may be challenging. The challenge lies in the fact that innovation aspects are just a small by-product of the current roles of the buyer and seller. As a result, new ideas may get stuck in the joint sphere mentioned in Figure 2 and are hence not put to further use in organizations. Companies need to recognize the importance of such ideas in order to utilize them better as well as to collect them in some way. Yet, the challenge is that the recognition of innovative ideas and forwarding or developing them is unfamiliar to the representatives, as it does not belong to their traditional tasks.

Therefore, there is a need for training sales representatives and finding an easy way for collecting customer understanding and new ideas without encumbering already busy sales representatives too much. One option is

close and regular interaction between sales representatives and product/service development, which could help transfer the ideas forward. Thus, it is important to have an open interplay between different company departments and not to stay in silos. All these aspects should be noticed when formulating a company's strategies, including a digital strategy for sales and marketing.

Still, creating new ideas will not happen if the seller and the customer are not in any kind of interaction. Digitalization has not changed the nature of sales meetings significantly yet and personal selling remains important. However, the content of the term 'personal' may change because of the developments in digital channels. This may create new kinds of dimensions to the joint sphere of Figure 2. In the future, online meetings and discussions with the same sales representatives in different kinds of digital channels may be seen as personal as face-to-face meetings and phone calls are seen today.

5

How can robotization support the buying process?



■ Value-based selling, where customers and salespeople are collaboratively solving problems and innovating solutions and value propositions (see chapter 4), may also happen in the social networks of the Internet (Shih 2016). In fact, when value-based selling is transferred to the digital channel, there are situations where the salesperson may even be a robot that is solving customers' problems by sharing relevant knowledge. However, value-based selling involves several stages and all stages cannot be transformed to digital channels – let alone be automated by robots. For example, factors such as trust and rapport are essential for sales success, and thus face-to-face interaction is often needed in building an emotional connection between customers and salespeople.

More and more companies are providing online chats to serve their customers or to support them in their buying processes. In this way, companies can support the decision-making by providing personalized and relevant information to guide the buying process. However, online chats often require a real person to interact with customers over the Internet, while customers may have information needs anytime, also after office hours. For example, entrepreneurs might make their small purchases after office hours, for example, in the evenings or weekends when service or contact centers are not open. Thus, there is a real need in the industry to build sales robots that can interact with customers at any time.

5.1 Sales robots bring companies a competitive advantage

Most chatbots are designed to be used by consumers. The field of btoB sales is lagging somewhat behind in the development as concerns the use of front-office software sales chatbots. This is quite understandable, as

btob deals are typically larger and more complex. However, there is no reason why btob e-commerce sites would not benefit from the implementation of sales assistant chatbots. Similarly, routine orders in a btob context can also easily be performed via a chatbot.

In the DIVA project, the use of sales robots was prototyped and tested with business customers to better understand how sales automation tools can support the btob buying process (Aunimo 2017). In the project, the attitudes of business customers towards the robotization of sales were also investigated. The results show two main trends. Firstly, the automatization of sales is seen as a very positive issue if it also provides support for the buying process outside of office hours when the sales personnel is not available (Alarakkola 2016). Secondly, our results show that business customers regard those companies that use some kind of sales bots or sales assistant bots as futuristic and technologically advanced (Aunimo 2017).

5.2 Back-office work automation brings benefits

Another field for software robotics in the context of sales is that of automation of back-office work. This includes tasks related to customer acquisition, such as the qualification of sales leads and the setting up of appointments. Automatic qualification of sales leads is both useful and effective when salespeople are overwhelmed with large numbers of sales leads, but due to a limited amount of resources can only follow up on some of the leads. The decision on which leads to follow is often based just on arbitrary rules and gut feeling (D'Haen & Van den Poel 2013). D'Haen, Van den Poel, Thorleuchter and Benoit (2016) present an experimental decision support system that automatically qualifies sales leads.

In addition to research results on the automatization of tasks related to customer acquisition, there are also commercial products that are claimed to perform the task. An example of such a sales automation tool is the virtual assistant Angie from Conversica AI. It sends emails to all sales leads, automatically interprets the answers to the emails and determines if a lead is hot. In the case of a hot lead, it also books a sales meeting with the right salesperson (Power 2017). While sales lead qualification is one of the very evident tasks for automation, routine work such as keeping information in different systems up to date and consistent also lends itself naturally

to automation. An example of such a task is keeping the customer information up to date in the CRM and invoicing system. Such tasks can be performed by using software robots that do not have a conversational user interface but that work in the background.

Most companies do not use robots in the field of sales – yet. However, robotization is a growing trend in our society and the companies that can exploit it before others gain a competitive advantage. Initial studies show that using both physical humanoid robots and chatbots does increase sales. The automation of back-office sales-related tasks increases productivity and quality. Routine work can be left to robots and salespeople can concentrate on tasks that require human skills and presence. Robots have no problem doing repetitive work and they are also happy to work at night and on weekends. Robotization is thus something that sales professionals should stay tuned to, as it will most probably offer new possibilities in the future.

6

Recommendations



■ This final chapter presents the DIVA research team's recommendations on how a company could embrace the opportunities of the digital era and move towards smart sales.

6.1 Create a digital strategy for sales and marketing

A company should have a clear digital strategy outlining how it will utilize digital channels in sales and marketing. The mix between digital and traditional channels should be based on an understanding of the needs of the company's own customers: where do they want to meet the seller during the different phases of the buyer's journey? Is it face to face, over the phone, on a company website, in social media or through other digital channels? When creating the channel strategy, it is important to keep in mind that the seller and buyer perspectives of the buyer's journey are very different. The company builds and creates content for separate touchpoints, but the customer does not perceive moving from one touchpoint to another but instead experiences all the activities of the company along the buyer's journey as a whole.

In its digital sales and marketing strategy, a company should decide which channels it will use for collecting customer insight, which content should be offered in each channel and how salespeople should be coached to use the digital channels. It is beneficial for the company to use various methods to collect customer insight to get a wide understanding of customer experience at the different stages of the buyer's journey. In addition to conducting customer surveys and customer interviews, a marketing automation system offers valuable information on customer behavior. User-centered service design methods and the creation of buyer personas may be useful when deciding which channels and contents to offer to the different customers to support their needs during their buyer journeys.

According to the results of the DIVA research, a modern btob buyer wants to be in touch with the company in an **easy, fast and personalized way**. A modern btob buyer appreciates user-friendly, easily navigable web pages where important information (contact information, product information, customer references) is easily found. The text in the digital channels should be written from the buyer's, not the seller's, point of view. A text only praising the accomplishments and the excellence of the seller is annoying for the buyer and does not help the seller company distinguish itself from its competitors. Moreover, the buyer expects the seller to respond very rapidly as soon as a contact request is made. Tomorrow might be too late. In addition, the modern btob buyer does not want to be treated anonymously but expects that s/he and her/his company are known and remembered. From the buyer's point of view, it would be ideal if the buyer could be in touch with the same contact person in each channel that s/he chooses along the journey, for example, to tweet and meet with the same salesperson.

6.2 Build digital trust and invest in technology

A company may build **digital trust** by offering open, transparent industry information and trends to its customers in digital channels. The interviewees in the DIVA research gave a clear indication that they are looking for solutions to their business needs and are not interested in reading or hearing overly fuzzy declarations of the seller companies' excellence. Moreover, a company may make its operations more efficient by utilizing existing technical solutions (marketing automation, chats) and by investing in new opportunities created by robotization. A robot is able to do a preliminary needs assessment, give recommendations and classify sales leads, for example. Technical solutions should enable the company to build connections between different company interfaces, for example, for the robot to connect to both customer information and the product database.

6.3 New competence requirements

The digital era is breaking down the silos between marketing, sales and product development. In addition, it increases the competence requirements of sales and marketing professionals. It is crucial that both educational institutions and private companies promptly start educating and coaching **smarketing professionals (sales + marketing)**. A smarketing professional has excellent digital and human-to-human skills. S/he is able to use digital tools, analyze information, use service design methods to build elements in both digital and human touchpoints, create conditions and build trust and value between the seller and the buyer.

Not only salespeople and marketers benefit from smarketing competence. The project personnel in service companies, particularly, have an excellent opportunity to find new sales opportunities and leads if they are able to interact with their customers in digital channels, for example, in the social media channel preferred by their customers. Moreover, the senior management and even the company board members should have a highly-developed view on the centrality of the customer experience in the digital age.

Smarketing professionals should be supported by specialists who understand the opportunities of information and communication technology and data analysis. They are able to develop the company information systems to support sales and marketing. They can utilize internal and external company data and promote robotization in a way that adds value to both selling and buying.

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