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A Good Story is a Vital Sales Tool

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In 1994, three explorers discovered paintings on the wall of a cave in the south of France. The depiction of 13 mammals is estimated to be the oldest cave painting known to man. Cave paintings are considered a form of communication and story-telling used by our ancestors. The story in the Chauvet Cave was told nearly 32,000 years ago. People at all stages of evolution have been telling stories ever since.

Historians believe that stories have been used to teach, resolve disputes, entertain and communicate. They help us visualize situations that we may not otherwise see or understand. Stories can be a powerful communication tool in many business situations; especially in selling.

Stories have universal appeal; they can be understood by both technical and non-technical decision makers. Stories are more easily remembered, and more likely to be passed along. If a sales person describes the value of a solution through its technical features, the value may not register with the prospect. But when described in the context of an actual experience of a real customer, the explanation takes on the life of a story.

A well-told story can reduce perceived risk. When you tell a story about a customer that faced a situation similar to that of your prospect; and how the customer's life was made easier, or the situation was improved by using your solution, a prospect's fear of failure is reduced. "If it worked for them, it can work for me."

A good story builds credibility. When a salesperson makes a statement about the virtues of the product she's selling, the statement can be considered biased because she has a vested interest in making the sale. But when the value is expressed through a true experience of another customer, it becomes a third-party testimonial; less biased and more credible.

Finally, stories evoke emotions, and emotions play a leading role in many purchase decisions. Product descriptions, specifications and features lists don't often trigger an emotional response. A well-told story involving a real customer can arouse enthusiasm, fear, surprise, anger or happiness.

How well does your sales organization use the story factor? Other than those glossy case studies produced by your marketing department, do your sales people regularly share true examples of customer successes with prospects? Can each of your sales reps describe specific, real-life usage scenarios involving your current customers? These customer success

stories are untapped knowledge in many organizations; knowledge that can be mined, managed and made available, for everyone's benefit.

So, where should you begin, to take advantage of the story factor?

Start by capturing the content. Great stories are in the memories of every employee who's spent time "in the field" with customers, and seen how they use your products. Ask those employees to share two or three scenarios at the next sales meeting. Another, and perhaps better source of stories are the customers themselves. Ask your current customers to describe specific instances of how they've used your solution, the advantages they've gained, and the specific benefits that have resulted. Document the stories in a consistent, clear format, and make them centrally accessible to the sales organization.

Manage the content. Make sure that you're keeping right mix of success story inventory. Can you describe three or more different customer successes for each product or service that you offer? Three or more stories for each customer segment, or vertical market that you serve? And do you have multiple stories that can serve to respond to the most common objections you hear from prospects?

Date your stories for freshness. A customer success that occurred two years ago may not have the same credibility as a similar situation that occurred last quarter. Revise and refresh your stories regularly.

Finally, with any good story, it's all in the delivery. The results you get from telling the story can vary, depending on how well you tell it. A story is actually a mini-presentation. Just as you would rehearse a presentation before delivering it live, you should rehearse your story, before telling it to a prospect.

A customer story is sales tool. And like a carpenter's tools or a surgeon's instruments, the greater the number and variety of stories that you have in your tool box, and the more adept you become at telling them, the better equipped you'll be to manage any situation you encounter in the course of selling. And you and your customers may just live happily ever after.

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