

The divide between sales and marketing is as legendary as it is universal. The two departments usually operate somewhat independent of each other. They share the same overall goals in driving sales and revenue, but may have different outlooks on how to achieve those objectives and how to market and launch products.

More often than not, this division is not planned; usually, it is simply the product of the way the company is organized or structured. The result, however, is that sales representatives have little involvement in the development of products and marketing campaigns, even though the sales force receives the most direct feedback from customers and can offer valuable strategic insight.

If sales representatives and marketing teams are better integrated, reps become more actively involved in product development, as well as in the execution of the product launch and subsequent marketing campaigns. This integration allows a company to create a more flexible, responsive, and engaging marketing plan that generates real sales results. Sales representatives directly contribute to the success of the marketing campaign, and to producing acceptance and customer satisfaction. While sales can have a role in developing products, their input should not end there. The sales reps' experience on the front line is instrumental in helping define the messaging and structure of a launch communications plan.

Sales representatives talk to customers every day. If they are seasoned, they have built long-standing, successful relationships with key accounts. If they are new, they are looking for ways to create relationships with new accounts. Sales reps can provide valuable insights into why and when customers buy and how best to communicate with them.

Nice idea, but how?

A great way to engage the sales team is to build a focus group with key individuals. They may include top, experienced sales executives, as well as new reps who have had success with their own "door buster" techniques. The group can also include reps who cover certain regions, or target certain accounts or job titles. The reps chosen for the group should be committed to participating in the process and should provide their own insights before the marketing team develops a plan, while the plan is in development, as well as after the campaign. Salespeople can also help marketing tap into key accounts or customers to get feedback on everything from messaging and creative to channels and delivery.

The more the sales force is engaged in the marketing process, the more successful the campaign will become from the start. If the salespeople feel like they were a part of the campaign development process, they will want to ensure the campaign is a success, thus helping turn the launch into sales revenue.

After the campaign has been launched, it is critical to circle back with the sales force to help solidify the overall return on investment. Marketers must ask: Did the campaign shorten the sales cycle? Did it open up new opportunities with existing customers or create conversations with prospects? Did the campaign help move the revenue needle? Once these questions are answered, it is likely the marketing team will see measurable benefits to involving the sales force in a marketing campaign. In addition, marketing should also seek out constructive criticism to find ways to improve the process for the success of future campaigns.

If the sales and marketing teams work together on product launches and communication campaigns, then customers' wants and needs will be better integrated into the product and better communicated to key audiences. There will be a bridge built between the two departments that will facilitate fruitful and profitable conversations, and improve customer satisfaction and product acceptance going forward.