

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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What Are You *Really* Selling??

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Lately I've been helping a number of clients launch their own startup companies.

"How will your business make money?" I ask. They respond, of course, by describing services or products that they plan to market.

"Why would anyone buy this from you?" I inquire. And the answer always builds around a competitive advantage such as price, quality, service, or convenience.

I listen attentively, then add, "That's well and good, but no one is going to buy your product or service merely because of price, quality, service or convenience. These things may help close the deal. But they are not the primary reason that customers transact business with you."

What Customers Buy

Ultimately, you see, customers do not buy products and services. They buy solutions. Solutions for problems. Solutions for challenges. Solutions that let them fulfill their desires. The product or service is simply a delivery vehicle for the solution.

We easily lose sight of this fact because we put our price tags on products and services. But what we are really selling is solutions. Not products. Not services. Not affordability, quality, service, or convenience. These things are best thought of as the packaging in which we wrap the solution.

When we view ourselves as selling solutions, the shift in perspective is striking. It compels us to focus less on our product and more on our customer. Selling solutions demands that we know potential customers well enough to foresee the challenges, problems, and desires that will set them on a quest for solutions.

Solutions, Not Services

To illustrate this point, allow me the luxury of a personal example. When making a new acquaintance, I can anticipate the question, "What do you do for a living?" I answer, "I help executives nail their most critical responsibilities."

In other words, I've looked at the critical responsibilities that most executives face. I've thought about the challenges and problems that arise from these responsibilities. And I've positioned myself to help them transcend these challenges and problems.

When I tell people that I help executives nail their most critical responsibilities, they feel a need to categorize me. They begin asking whether I'm an executive coach or a consultant or a trainer.

And the answer is, I sometimes function in each of these capacities. In addition, I'm sometimes a facilitator. And at other times I'm a keynote speaker. It all depends on what it takes to help clients nail their most critical responsibilities.

Truth be told, the invoice that I submit to customers will identify my services as executive coaching or consulting or training or what have you. That's a necessary convention to conform with the finance department's accounting system. But the invoice merely names the mechanism that I used to deliver what the client really bought, which was my help with solving a problem or meeting a challenge.

Three Key Marketing Questions

Developing a well-designed marketing plan therefore begins with this question: "What are the solutions that we provide?" Next we follow with the question, "In addition to our present products and services, what other possible vehicles (i.e., products and services) could we use to deliver these same solutions?" And then a third question: "What other problems or challenges do our customers face to which we could provide solutions?"

These questions expand our creativity in developing market strategies. They open our thinking to a host of possible products or services that might never cross our minds if we were asking, "Where can we find more markets for our product?"

If we think of ourselves as merely selling a product or service, we will look to expand sales by tweaking the product to enhance it or by finding new buyers for it. In the process we may occasionally see the opportunity for a new product. But for the most part we will focus on the product already in hand.

But if we see ourselves as providing solutions, we continually ask, "What other delivery mechanisms could I use to provide these solutions to clients?"

Moreover, being truly solutions-centric reduces the tendency to develop undue attachment to any one product or service. We don't fall blindly in love with the product. When it has run its life-cycle, we have no problem recognizing that moment and setting the product or service aside for some other delivery mechanism that serves our purposes better.

I should add that it's not always easy to distance ourselves far enough from our "product mindset" to get a clear sense of the solution or solutions that we actually provide. That was certainly true with me. But once we can succinctly identify the solutions that we offer, it brings a focus to our planning, product development, marketing, and energy that pays unparalleled dividends.

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