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## Nine Things Product Managers Need to Know About Supporting Sales

This is the second part of two articles that address how sales work and how Product Managers can better support them. The previous article in this series covered the [Ten Things that Product Managers Need to Know About Sales](#). This article discusses how Product Managers can better support the sales process and sales reps.

*“The sales team is one of the most critical success factors for a product. The sales team touches the customer directly, and the product manager must take responsibility to provide the sales tools and attitude needed to ensure success. Smart companies know that the information that comes back from the field is often just as important as what you send out. Best practices that encourage active participation between sales and product management and marketing can give your products the necessary edge in highly competitive technology markets.”*

*David Hickman*

ActivePortal Product Line Manager, TIBCO

### Product Managers Are Not Sales Engineers

Product Managers (PMs) are at the epicenter of driving the product and therefore the hub of product knowledge. However, direct product support of the sales process is the sales engineer's (SE) job, not the PM's. If a PM is constantly dragged into sales cycles, he will become an SE. One of the consequences of this is losing the necessary perspective for managing the product. Yes, PMs need to work with and support the sales force but more as consultants than full time participants. One may point out that in many companies, PMs are called in to help with specific sale cycles. While this is the case and many times necessary, PMs rarely have the training for this. It's the PM's job to support the sales group, not to support individual sales processes.




#### Tip

The above notwithstanding, make sure that your reluctance to be dragged into an SE role is not seen as arrogance or unwillingness to help drive the bottom line.

### Help, Don't Preach - Your Sales Rep is on the Front Line and They Need Help Now!


The sales rep is in many ways is similar to a frontline soldier. Just as on the battlefield where soldiers need air cover, sales reps need product, marketing and other types of support. The analogy goes further. When a sales rep calls for urgent help to save a sale, the PM needs to do anything they can to help. While in theory, PMs are not supposed to support specific sales cycle, no one cares less about theory when a sale is at risk. Help

the rep first, examine and fix the process that got him to need urgent support later. Coming to the rescue of a sales rep when he's under fire, doesn't mean becoming their SE.

	<p><b>Tips</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Create effective communication channels with the sales force. Set up a Sales Support SWAT Team. Hand pick your members from the various groups that include, Product Management, Product Marketing, Engineering, Customer Support and QA. Make sure to have representatives from the field such as Sales Engineers.</li><li>• Hold weekly conference calls to keep everyone up to date and keep everyone informed about the latest developments in the field as well as with the product. Use the forum to share new leads, opportunities and outstanding issues</li><li>• Other effective communication tools are email aliases and archived discussion groups.</li></ul> <p style="text-align: right;">David Hickman ActivePortal Product Line Manager, TIBCO</p>
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### Know the Difference Between Demoiing and Training

Too frequently, product managers turn product demos into training sessions. A demo is a presentation of the benefits the product will deliver. A demo becomes a training session when the presenter describes how the promise of the benefits is realized, what the user needs to do to achieve these benefits and how the product behaves. Understanding the difference between these two presentations of the product is critical issue when in front of decision makers. Decision makers are interested in the benefits, not about how the product works. Or as the Chinese say: "It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white as long as it kills mice."

	<p><b>Tip</b></p> <p>Rule #1 of Demos – Know thy audience.</p>
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### Sometimes, Feigning Ignorance is a Good Thing

"... About 30 minutes into my presentation, one of the programmers in the back of the room raises their hand. I called on him. I knew the answer and shot it back at him with my very impressive answer. This happened several times and the result was the same. My confidence was building... I noticed however that my sales manager didn't appear as happy as I thought he should be under the circumstances.

At the half-way mark, we took a break and my sales manager pulled me aside and asked me what I thought was going on with the questions. With full confidence, I told him the guy in the back just wanted to test to see if I really knew my stuff. He said "No, that's not it. He's trying to show the chief that he's worth the money he's paying him by stumping the sales guy. The next time he asks you a question, instead of giving it to him, why don't you try saying 'good question... I'm not sure... let me make a note of it and get back to you.'"

When I began the second half, it wasn't long before a hand shot up in the back of the room. I knew the answer. This time however, I answered with... "good question... I'm not sure... let me make a note of that and I'll get back to you." What surprised me was the fact that I saw this programmer, who had been asking all those tough questions, look over at the chief, and the chief nodded in recognition! This guy never asked me another question during the remainder of the presentation. My sales manager was right! He was just trying to prove his value to his boss."

*Don France, Principal*

*SalesNavigation*

*Reminiscing about is first days as a sales rep*

Some prospects' behaviors are motivated by concerns that are foreign to advancing the buying process. As in the example above, the programmer was out to prove his worth to his manager by stumping the sales rep, not to learn more about the product. By not answering the programmer's question, the narrator was able to end his stream of disruptive questions and make himself look better to his manager. By feigning ignorance, the sales rep was able to move on with the presentation and increase the chances of closing the sale.

Other times you should consider feigning ignorance:

- When the prospect asks about the product roadmap and you don't feel comfortable sharing it with them due to confidentiality concerns or that you know that the prospect's wish list is not part of the roadmap.
- If the prospect asks about pricing. Pricing should always be left to the sales rep.

### **Know When to not to Speak**

PMs are brought into meetings with prospects as product experts to collect input and to learn about their needs. Before a PM joins a sales call, it must be very clear to all those involved exactly what the PM can and cannot say. One example of counter productive enthusiasm is to tell the prospect about great new features on the roadmap only to have them defer their purchase until these features are available.

When talking about the product, if you get to a point where a prospect says "this is perfect" or "this is great", that's a signal to stop talking. From the prospect's perspective, you can only go down from here. Describing additional features and functionalities cannot improve upon this statement and they risk generating objections. Overselling the product can wear the prospect down and dampen their enthusiasm.



#### **Tip**

**There is a basic difference between knowing the product and knowing how to explain it to advance the sales process.**

## KISS (Keep it Simple...)

Sales reps are very selective in how they apply their intelligence. If they don't see how the information you are presenting them as having a direct bearing on their sales efforts, they will tend to forget it. So... whatever you train them with, keep it simple and relevant. The same goes for communicating with them. Keep it simple and straightforward. Always make sure that it is clear to the reps what benefits they are getting out of your communication to them. Just as with prospects, presenting sales reps with more information will tend to dilute the message.



### Tip

How to test your message for complexity – If the sales reps understand what you are saying, great. But that's not good enough. They have to be able to explain it in their own words to a prospect that is even less knowledgeable than they are. That's the criteria that matters.

## Don't Put Lipstick on the Pig

Marketing should understand better than anyone what the competitors are doing and help the reps sort out the product's strengths and weaknesses vs. the competition. PMs should provide the wording for the "spin" but start by letting the reps know the whole truth. Reps hate getting blindsided by something the competition really does better than they didn't know about. Getting blindsided at a prospect looks extremely unprofessional and blows any credibility a rep might have for a consultative sale.

## Keep the Sales Materials Timely and Accessible

Sales materials get outdated very quickly. Continuous effort must be made to ensure that the reps have the most up to date materials. Don't rely on reps to "pull" this material from a central repository. If you can push materials to their desktops, great. But if not, use a portal server with a notification feature to update the sales reps when new sales materials are posted.

*" Keeping sales tools up-to-date is always a challenge, especially when you deal with as many products as we do in Higher Ed. Therefore our marketing Intranet site (for internal use) is synched with our electronic sales manual. Consolidating information in a database format that can be presented in a browser is huge for us, especially now that we are carrying laptops or Tablet PCs on campus."*

*Chad Douglas, Pacific Regional Manager*

*McGraw-Hill Higher Education*

## I Need This Feature to Close the Deal...

Sales reps tend to see everything from the perspective of their current sales cycle. As a PM, you must recognize that the sales rep is passing on *his* understanding of what the prospect wants. The problem is that most sales reps do not have the tools to understand what the prospect needs vs. what the prospect claims she wants. Nor do they have the

ability to accurately explain it the pain to you. It's your job to contact the prospect, via the rep, and get a better understanding of her needs.

A common problem is that the feature the rep "needs" to close a deal may be forgotten by the customer the day after its delivered and it is the PM's job to investigate, understand and add the correct perspective to their request.

It's the sales rep's responsibility to avoid getting to a point late in the process where a prospect raises an objection about a missing critical feature. Critical features in this context are either environmental features such as the OS required to run the product, font support etc. or cultural features such that accommodate local cultures such as localization. Without support for these features, the rep will not be able to sell in a specific market.

Re. other, less critical features, when a prospect raises an objection because of a missing feature, this is usually a cover for another point of discomfort that the prospect is not verbalizing. A good sales rep will identify these objections and diffuse them.

## Summary

To be as effective as possible, PMs need to understand the sales process and how to effectively support sales reps and the sales process.

Good hunting!

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