

Weapons of mass disruption

Selling disruptive technology means moving out of the comfort zone

Selling disruptive technology is one of the most difficult, intriguing, risky and rewarding tasks that we can become engaged with. It involves taking salespeople and customers out of their comfort zones.

Disruptive technologies are the much talked about paradigm shifts, examples being the first mainframe computer, the minicomputer, spreadsheets, relational databases and ERP. Let's take an historic and a current example.

When minicomputers first appeared the technology was revolutionary, with unheard of price-performance points, but without the sophistication of mainframes. Vendors quickly realised that they could not be sold to the IT department, which was entrenched in a mainframe view of the world. At the time, Digital Equipment grew very rapidly with a basic sales and marketing strategy of not competing with mainframes, but surrounding them with systems that were sold to individual departmental users such as process control and laboratory experimentation, which were well outside of the capability or political reach of the IT group. With initial success it started attacking applications closer to the mainframe such as word processing.

Currently we are entering the closing stages of another disruptive technology battle, with IP telephony. This time it is slightly different in that there are two powerful camps that are battling over the new space of a converged technology. Voice vendors, which understand telephony but know little about data communications, are fighting data communications specialists that know little about voice applications.

For customers it is a battle between networking managers and telecoms managers or between CIOs and their users. For vendors it is technology focus versus application and support focus. Integrators that actually sell and deliver working solutions are caught in the middle, enjoying either the best or worst of both worlds. If they can rapidly gain expertise as well as credibility then they can become very successful; conversely they can be outmanoeuvred by new entrants that enter with stealth and gain strategically important beachheads.



Successful selling organisations have learnt that:

- Being a new player has many advantages (and lots of disadvantages).
- As an established player, you have to be prepared to cannibalise your own base and create demand within your accounts before someone else does it.
- You have to figure out new approaches, selling to new people in new ways. Experimentation and focus are key, with overlay sales teams often being successful.
- Until the new technology becomes very widespread, sales will be application led, mainly into user departments, demanding excellent solution selling approaches.
- Winning early battles will be difficult, and winning the account longer term will be even more difficult.

Successful salespeople have learnt:

- To be flexible, adaptable and learn fast.
- To accept that you do not have all of the answers, so you need to rely on sales skills and process.
- To factor in that your organisation will be challenged to support you in marketing, pre-sales and implementation; to help your firm face these challenges without becoming too frustrated.
- To look out for and spot new or different competitors.
- To create and shape deals – there is no demand to be fulfilled.

Sales managers have learned that it takes a particular kind of salesperson to be successful in a disruptive environment. The old definition of hunter or farmer is no longer sufficient. The successful salesperson will be a very quick learner, with the drive of a hunter, and with the finely honed political

skills of an excellent account director.

I came across such a salesperson recently, working for a communications integrator, who managed to negotiate his way around an existing retail account where the CIO was very reluctant to embrace converged networks, partly as it would lead to conflict with other parts of the business that had traditionally managed all non-data applications.

Despite being advised by his managers not to waste time advocating the converged solution, he cast his net widely and discovered then nurtured an ally in the HR director, who was very worried about union demands for increased security of night shift workers and older staff working in car parks. This led to a requirement for an enhanced CCTV application that had to be very flexible – and an IP based solution was a great fit. Weaving technical and financial considerations into a compelling business case, a pilot solution was deployed by partnering with video surveillance specialists. Within six months the pilot had proven successful and led to a major upgrade of the data network to carry video traffic. From there the case for voice and data to be converged onto the new platform was an easy sale.

This is a typical example of great solution selling of disruptive technology as part of a good account strategy. It is not straightforward, requiring relationship building outside of the current contact group, creativity in the account strategy and stretching internal resources. **SF**

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