

E-LEARNING

A New Era in Selling



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Art Waskey is a speaker who truly delivers. In addition to a 45 year career in sales and marketing, Art is the author of multiple books on selling and a monthly column *The Art of Sales*. He shares these insights as an in demand event and conference speaker as well as leadership coach.

Returning to sales life after COVID has produced several issues. A reentry to in-person calls reveals that many customers have changed their buying habits to using alternative online suppliers. In addition, the pandemic forced the best distributors to work diligently on converting customers to eCommerce so the customer could place their orders online through the distributor website. In many ways, we have entered a new digital era in selling, leaving sales managers and reps feeling insecure.

What part should the distributor outside salesforce play in this evolving disruptive B2B digitalization transition? Historically, with new innovation disruptions comes broad-scope opportunities. One of the greatest failures in alternative digital supply channels [including direct supplier sales], is getting someone to respond when there is an urgent need. If you can find a phone number, you can spend hours working through an automated

attendant system and the person you finally engage normally doesn't have the required expertise.

How do we couple the weakness in communication with the benefit of in-person selling? First, let's consider the historical transitions in sales. The late 20st century saw a move from transactional sales to relationship selling. In the early 21st century we saw a focus on solution selling. I believe the next sales model is **commercial insight**.

In their seminal 2011 work, *The Challenger Sales, Taking Control of the Customer Conversation*, Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson, set the stage for the sales strategies needed for this digital transition. "Customer loyalty is won out in the field, in the trenches during the sales call. Over half of customer loyalty is not what you sell, but how you sell." The distributor field sales force has an opportunity to teach the customer something new and valuable about their



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business, which is what they want. This new education reliably leads to commercial wins for the distributor and the supplier.

Dixon and Adamson present four key rules for this teaching model, Commercial Teaching. The broad term for this new transition of selling is **commercial insight**.

4 KEY RULES

1. Lead to your unique strengths – “The sweet spot of customer loyalty is outperforming your competitors on those things you’ve taught your customers.” The well trained distributor will lead with their unique strengths. The strength of the digitalization model is the proliferation of new distributor added-value tools such as Vendor Managed Inventory (VMI), AI predictive analytics, Kanban manufacturing strategies, system engineering, ‘customized’ containers and delivery equipment, etc. As an example, my career was spent in the atmospheric gas industry (products like oxygen, nitrogen, argon, carbon dioxide, hydrogen, helium, etc.) We use innovative telemetry systems to measure, and report change in volume, pressure and temperature.

These added-value tools differentiate the distributor from the other channels and direct supplier selling. Help your customer create the return on investment he/she will realize.

2. Challenge customers’ assumptions – Help your customer reframe the way they think about their business. Spend the time to get to know your customers’ business better than they know it themselves that speaks to your capabilities.

A salesperson took an artificial intelligence (AI) vendor with him to a potential customer call. His customer was shown how to integrate the technology into his manufacturing process.

3. Catalyze action – You have the opportunity to get them to act. Build a compelling business case for why action matters in the first place. “Unless you can convince your customer they’ll get incremental value for that premium price, your solution strategy is doomed to fail.”

4. Scale across customers – Once Commercial Teaching is applied to the added-value tools to one customer, they are transferrable to other customers. Just develop a set of well-scripted insights along with two or three easy-to-remember diagnostic questions and you are ready to apply it to the next customers.

This new era of digitalization will give the opportunist a new sales method, commercial insight, “to teach customers what they really need by challenging the way they think about their business altogether, providing them with new means to address their toughest problems in ways they would have never identified on their own. Customers are looking to their distributors

to challenge their thinking and teach them something they don’t know.” Digitalization will continue to produce new products and services that distributor salespeople will sell to make the customer’s business better.