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by Karl Schmidt, Brent Adamson, and Anna Bird

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Making the Consensus Sale

You have to align all the decision makers.
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Sales reps have long been taught to seek out the executive who can single-handedly approve a deal at a company. But whether they're selling to a customer with 50 employees or 50,000, reps today rarely find a unilateral decision maker. More often, they discover that the authority to make decisions rests with groups of individuals—all of whom have different roles, and all of whom have veto power. Reaching consensus and closing deals has become an increasingly painful and protracted process for customers and suppliers alike.

To understand the impact of buying groups on sales, CEB recently conducted four surveys of more than 5,000 stakeholders involved in B2B purchases. We found that, on average, 5.4 people now have to formally sign off on each purchase. Complicating matters, the variety of jobs, functions, and geographies that these individuals represent is much wider than it used to be. Whereas an IT supplier might have once sold directly to a CIO and his or her team, today that same firm may also need buy-in from the chief marketing officer, the chief operating officer, the chief financial officer, legal counsel, procurement executives, and others. The people on buying teams have increasingly diverse priorities, and to win them over, suppliers must bridge those differences. The

upshot is longer cycle times, smaller deals, lower margins, and, in the ever more common worst case, customer deadlock that scuttles the deal. (See the exhibit "Group Size Matters.")

Innovative suppliers, however, are finding effective ways to create consensus in these buying groups. This article describes how those companies prime groups with a common language and shared perspectives, motivate internal champions to advocate for their firms' solutions, and equip those champions to help groups reach agreement. As we'll see, accomplishing all of this requires some novel approaches and a new level of collaboration between sales and marketing.

Understanding Customer Consensus

CEB's surveys spanned a wide range of industries, geographies, and go-to-market models and an even larger array of issues associated with group purchases—everything from buying-group demographics to purchase-process dynamics to individual behavior. Three key conclusions emerged from the responses:

1. Personalization can backfire. Conventional wisdom holds that the more personalized a message is, the more effectively it will drive a sale. And indeed, CEB's surveys found that individual customer stakeholders who perceived supplier content to be tailored to their specific needs were 40% more willing to buy from that supplier than stakeholders who didn't. Marketers understand this: In another survey,

**Consensus
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Idea in Brief

THE PROBLEM

Increasingly, decisions about large company purchases are made not by individual executives but by a group of managers. Because group members often have different priorities, getting them to reach agreement poses a big challenge for suppliers.

THE SOLUTION

Salespeople must learn to build consensus. They can do so by helping buying-group members discover shared language and goals; motivating individual members of the group to become advocates for their firms' solutions; and equipping those advocates to teach and persuade.

THE BENEFITS

Consensus building taps capabilities within both sales and marketing. Companies that encourage the two functions to collaborate on consensus-focused strategies are seeing decisive improvements in sales performance.

95% of nearly 200 B2B CMOs identified “better tailoring of content” as a top priority. But personalization has a dark side. When individuals in a buying group receive different messages, each one stressing that an offering meets his or her narrow needs, it can highlight the diverging goals and priorities in the group, driving a wedge between members and hindering consensus.

The implication for suppliers is clear: The best way to build customer consensus isn't to do a better job of connecting individual customer stakeholders to the supplier but to more effectively connect customer stakeholders to one another.

2. Achieving consensus is hardest early in the buying process. To help groups reach decisions, it's critical to understand where in the purchase process they run into trouble. Our research divided the typical process into three phases: problem definition, solution identification, and supplier selection. We then asked customer stakeholders to look at both group and individual decisions and say which phases of them were most difficult.

Two results stood out: B2B buyers found group decision making most difficult twice as often as individual decision making. More important, the phase they seemed to experience the most challenges with was identifying a solution—agreeing on the best course regardless of supplier. Most suppliers are focusing on the wrong stage of the buying process, falling all over themselves to persuade customers to choose them, rather than helping customers settle on a solution.

Our data shows that customers are, on average, 37% of the way through a purchase process by the time they reach the solution-definition stage, and 57% of the way through the process before they engage with supplier sales reps. So all too often customer consensus has fallen apart before reps even

arrive on the scene. If suppliers aren't anticipating and proactively overcoming disconnections among stakeholders before sales engagements, they're probably losing many deals—without even knowing it.

Achieving customer consensus presents not just a problem for sales but also an opportunity for marketing. Marketing departments are well positioned to foster consensus for two reasons: They have tools that can reach customers more effectively than sales can during the critical consensus-building process, and they can combine customer knowledge from sales with their own market research to identify patterns of customer behavior and broad customer insights that they can translate into scalable marketing approaches and materials.

3. Willingness to buy and willingness to advocate are not the same. Because a supplier has limited access to buying-group members during the early stages of the process, it needs the active help of an advocate inside the customer organization. We call these people “mobilizers.” Mobilizers come in many forms, but the best are motivated to improve their organization; are passionate about sharing their insights with colleagues; ask smart, probing questions; and have the organizational clout and connections to bring decision makers together.

But to effectively use mobilizers, suppliers must address two challenges: the willingness of individuals to advocate on a supplier's behalf, and their ability to do so. A CEB survey of nearly 600 B2B buyers found that fully half the people who reported a willingness to buy a product or service were not willing to publicly advocate for it. This represents a huge obstacle for suppliers seeking to leverage mobilizers to create consensus.

Research shows that potential mobilizers are inhibited by the perceived risks inherent in fighting for change and promoting consensus. Up to half fear

losing respect or credibility in their organization if they push for an unpopular purchase or are unable to attract support, or if the purchase they backed turns out to be unwise. Twelve percent even report that such advocacy could threaten their jobs. (The old saying “Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM” speaks to this point; potential advocates don’t want to be the person who went out on a limb for the “wrong” supplier.) Fear of these consequences increases dramatically as the size of a buying team grows.

Ultimately, the decision to publicly advocate for change is driven much more by the personal value provided to the mobilizer than by the business value provided to that individual’s organization. In studying what inspires mobilizers, we found that factors such as whether a solution could advance a person’s career or help him be seen as a better leader were five

times as potent as the offering’s “business value”—things like superior product features, likely impact on business outcomes, or return on investment.

Overcoming potential mobilizers’ perceptions of personal risk requires a personal appeal, not just an organizational one. This is a deeply telling point, because the most common tools in suppliers’ tool kits—for example, ROI calculators, lifetime-value assessments, and total-cost-of-ownership scorecards—address organizational risks and rewards but say very little about individual ones. Once again, suppliers are emphasizing the wrong things with their sales and marketing investments.

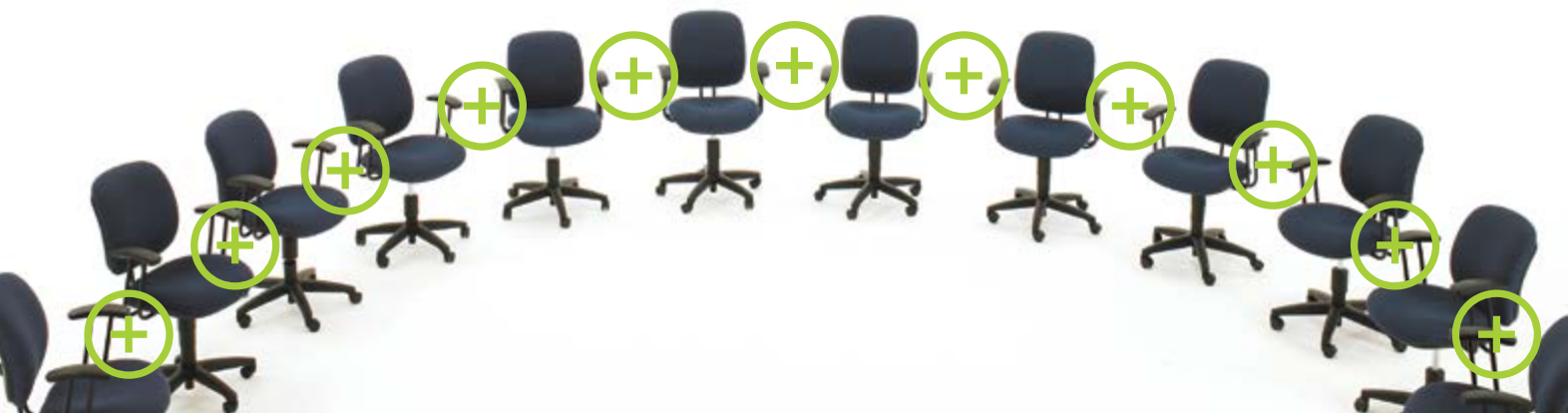
But even when someone sees the personal value to be gained and is motivated to become a mobilizer, he or she will need support. Marketing has a key role to play in both encouraging mobilizers and equipping them to build consensus.

Help stakeholders see their shared interests and find common ground.

Creating Customer Consensus

In research with hundreds of organizations and thousands of sales and marketing executives, we have identified three strategies that are key in building consensus. Below, we’ll describe each of them in detail, illustrating them with selected examples of approaches that have proved effective at the companies that belong to CEB Marketing.

1. Priming customer buying groups for agreement by creating a common language and shared perspectives around a problem and a solution. The starting point in any program to build consensus is to identify common ground among stakeholders. If you’re selling enterprise marketing-management solutions, you’ll most likely be dealing with at least the CMO, the CIO, the CFO, and procurement, who all have overlapping but distinct and sometimes conflicting interests. Helping those stakeholders see their shared interests will set



the stage for consensus and make it easier—and less risky—for mobilizers to advocate on your behalf.

Two approaches can help purchase decision makers focus on what unites rather than what separates them:

Language mapping. Like many companies, the network and security solutions provider Cisco mines social media and online publications to track trending terms and themes in its space. By analyzing the phrases surrounding terms of interest, Cisco captures the context of online conversations and can identify the priorities of various stakeholders as well as topics that might appeal to them. For example, in discussions of smart devices, it found that both CMOs and CIOs focused on “connectivity,” though the CMOs might refer a lot to “product development” and “innovation,” and CIOs to “systems upgrades” and “network architecture.”

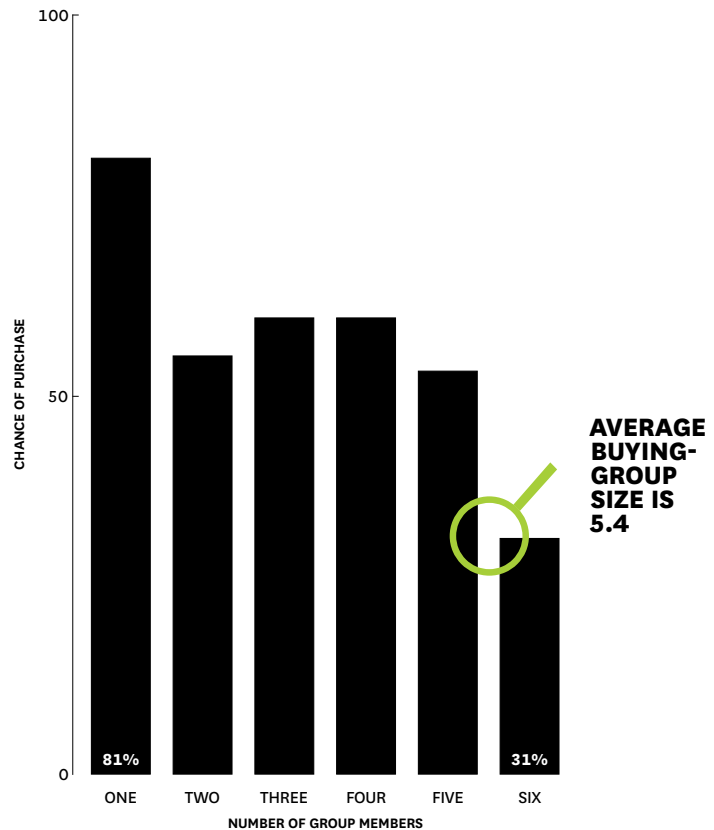
The area of overlap—“connectivity”—gave Cisco’s marketers the raw materials to develop messaging. They crafted a range of experimental messages (such as “connectivity isn’t as high as you think” and “Only 1% of devices are connected so far”), embedded them in social media, and then tracked adoption of the language in online conversations among both stakeholder groups. The marketing team then integrated resonating concepts and tested messages into collateral, such as tweets, blogs, and white papers, to help create a common language and shared perspectives among stakeholders. Cisco’s sales reps report that this approach has raised interest in connectivity—which Cisco’s products enable—among both CIOs and CMOs, increasing alignment between two often disconnected parties.

Shared learning. In some cases stakeholders believe that no common ground exists and that their interests are mutually exclusive. A production manager, for example, may feel that her goals for efficiency are deeply different from a safety officer’s goals—though in fact they aren’t. In such cases, shared learning experiences can expose common priorities.

Kimberly-Clark Professional (KCP) sells health and safety products and services to businesses worldwide. To make enterprise sales such as airframe maintenance solutions, KCP may have to align the seemingly diverse interests of production managers, safety officers, sustainability heads, purchasing managers, and others who need to agree on a purchase. One way KCP achieves this is through facilities assessments, or site surveys, that provide

GROUP SIZE MATTERS

THE LIKELIHOOD OF A PURCHASE DROPS SHARPLY AS THE NUMBER OF DECISION MAKERS INCREASES.



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shared learning. Marketing promotes the surveys on its website and sends potential customers invitations explaining the benefits of “learning tours” in which KCP experts visit facilities, offer advice on improvements, and answer questions. Typically, the accompanying materials promise guidance on how to control costs, increase productivity, reduce workers’ exposure to hazardous materials, and increase environmental performance—highlighting the stakeholders’ shared needs. After the walk-through, KCP provides a report summarizing its findings and recommendations.

Greif, a global industrial packaging manufacturer, takes another approach to shared learning. Companies in its industry generally struggle with commoditization, as most purchasing decisions are

CONVERTING SALES TOOLS INTO MOBILIZER TOOLS

SUPPLIERS OFTEN HAVE SALES COLLATERAL THAT COULD BE REPURPOSED TO HELP INTERNAL CHAMPIONS, OR “MOBILIZERS,” BUILD CONSENSUS AROUND PURCHASES WITHIN CUSTOMERS’ ORGANIZATIONS. WHEN ADAPTING THOSE MATERIALS, MARKETERS SHOULD FOLLOW THESE THREE PRINCIPLES:

1 Make content supplier neutral. Mobilizers will reject anything that makes them look like skills. To be credible, information on both the problem and the solution should not promote any one supplier or offering, though it’s OK to clarify elements of the problem or the solution that your company is uniquely able to address.

2 Minimize mobilizers’ efforts. Mobilizers will act only if they feel that the personal value of promoting a product or service outweighs the effort of doing so. Ensure that the recommendations in materials are as clear and simple to execute as possible. Remove technical language, streamline processes, and clarify how much time and information will be required to tailor materials to the mobilizers’ organizations.

3 Address knowledge or skill gaps. Mobilizers don’t have the benefit of your sales reps’ experience. Leverage any existing materials that document your reps’ expertise, such as purchase-process knowledge, cross-functional perspectives, or persuasive tactics. Where necessary, create new tools by partnering with sales to understand common obstacles and easy ways around them.

based solely on cost. Realizing that connecting offerings with customers’ sustainability goals could elevate packaging decisions to a more strategic level, Greif developed a diagnostic tool that potential customers can use to evaluate the environmental benefits of various operational changes, including switching to lightweight shipping containers. The calculator (called the Green Tool) requires the participation of multiple stakeholders and, like the KCP learning tours, helps decision makers with different goals discover their areas of alignment. A sustainability head, for example, understanding that a packaging switch could reduce the firm’s CO₂ emissions, might reach out to purchasing and plant managers for data the tool requires—such as container weights and volume, transport distances, and trip-page rates (a measure of a reusable container’s life span)—to calculate the emissions impact of various containers over their life cycles. The Green Tool

reveals cost and sustainability benefits that resonate for each stakeholder—not just the sustainability head—moving the group toward a shared decision to purchase. In the three years following the introduction of the tool, sales of Greif’s sustainable products and services have increased significantly. For example, sales of lightweight plastic drums grew by about 15% from 2011 to 2013.

2. Motivating mobilizers. As discussed, your potential mobilizers may fear they’ll hurt their credibility and job security by lobbying for a specific solution. They must believe the rewards of advocacy will outweigh the risk and effort. There are two important levers marketers can use to shift the risk/reward balance in the right direction.

Decrease individuals’ perceived risk. Potential mobilizers often hesitate to recommend a purchase because they’re unsure that others in the organization will support their position. The results of one of our surveys—of 3,000 employees across a range of organizations—hammered home that point: Willingness to advocate for a purchase more than doubled as perceived organizational support for a supplier increased. The challenge for suppliers, then, is to reveal this support. The shared learning events described earlier can help, but more-focused approaches that target individual advocates and encourage them to speak up are critical to getting the customer group to participate in such events or engage with diagnostic tools in the first place.

Holcim, a global supplier of cement and related products and services for the construction industry, uses a simple and effective tactic to do this. As a component of its sales operations, Holcim regularly surveys people throughout its customers’ organizations to collect Net Promoter Scores (which gauge willingness to recommend a product or a company). If an account manager encounters a potential advocate for a new offering at an existing customer, a Holcim rep can present that person with NPS data from other functions that demonstrates broad support for Holcim’s offerings. Reps report that advocates are often unaware of allies within their organization until they see the NPS numbers and say that the data gives those allies confidence to promote a purchase.

Increase perceived rewards. Connecting with customers’ emotions has long been central to consumer marketing. It’s less common in the B2B world, where sales and marketing typically focus on conveying the business value of products and

services. But combining perceived value with an emotional tie can make all the difference in motivating a mobilizer.

W.W. Grainger, a global provider of maintenance, repair, and operations (MRO) solutions, traditionally sold to facility managers who had wide latitude in selecting MRO suppliers. But with pressure to contain costs growing, facility managers were increasingly required to defend their choices. Grainger started finding that many weren't motivated to make a case for using Grainger, despite its premium offerings, as other suppliers were often perceived as "good enough."

Through its market research, Grainger discovered that facility managers see themselves as behind-the-scenes problem solvers who face daily obstacles to keeping their plants running safely and efficiently. Out of this finding came "Get It. Got It. Good," a campaign designed to demonstrate a direct connection between Grainger's unique capabilities and managers' desire to run facilities at peak performance. The campaign reflected the gritty reality of the job and conveyed that Grainger understood the challenges facility managers face and their fear of missteps that would cause downtime.

The result of the campaign? Reps report that facility managers feel that Grainger "gets them" better than competitors do and are more motivated to advocate for Grainger products. The campaign has dramatically outperformed expectations, delivering 175% of expected returns.

3. Equipping mobilizers to be effective. Mobilizers typically aren't salespeople. They usually aren't experienced with change processes, may lack a cross-functional perspective, and may not be skilled at persuasion. Suppliers can help them in all these areas. Indeed, 80% of the mobilizers we surveyed told us they wanted support from suppliers in communicating the value of solutions they championed.

In an earlier time, providing that support would have principally been a sales task. But because the challenges to achieving consensus often emerge before sales has a foot in the door, this task increasingly falls to marketing. Progressive marketing teams, we've found, are adeptly converting sales-enablement materials to support mobilizers, making those materials freely available early in the consensus process, and distributing them in lead-nurturing e-mails, through blogs, and in myriad other ways.

Consider one approach used by Marketo, a provider of marketing automation software. Marketo

created a 100-page mobilizer tool kit, "The Definitive Guide to Marketing Automation," which it e-mails to leads and posts on its website. The tool kit covers everything from what marketing automation is to the future of the technology. But its central chapters zero in on the specifics mobilizers need to make their business case internally. It provides detailed guidance on how to communicate the value of marketing automation to diverse stakeholders, including the CEO, the CMO, the CFO, the CIO, and the head of sales, walking readers through the chief concerns of each executive and how to address them. It also offers tips on the art of persuasion, including the need to understand management's objectives and to create a financial case, and the importance of "discussing, not presenting." The arguments given are supported with case studies. Finally, the guide takes mobilizers through the purchase process, with a primer on aligning internal stakeholders and selecting a vendor. While the guide carries the Marketo brand, it is conspicuously supplier agnostic, devoting only a single page, tucked at the end, to Marketo's solution.

CEB has presented the Marketo case to hundreds of marketing executives in dozens of sessions. In every session at least one CMO says he or she has already used Marketo's tool kit in purchasing marketing automation software. Pam Boiros, vice president of corporate marketing at Skillsoft, found the concept so compelling that she decided to create a similar tool for Skillsoft. Says Boiros, "Many of our sales team members tell us they are using this guide—in whole or in part—to set expectations with customers, help guide the purchase decision, and influence RFPs."

THE BIGGEST change in sales and marketing today is how customers buy. The new need to create consensus is turning decades of conventional sales wisdom on its head—replacing the requirement that sales focus first on connecting the customer with the supplier with a requirement to connect decision makers within a customer's organization with one another. The other major requirement, more implicit than explicit in this article, is that the relationship between sales and marketing finally change. Companies have long paid lip service to the need for sales and marketing to play together nicely. But given today's pressure to drive consensus, suppliers that don't align sales and marketing as a single team with a common goal will be trounced by suppliers that do. ▾

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FURTHER READING

This article is the third in a series by CEB authors on the changing nature of sales and the strategies for adapting to it. Go to HBR.org to read the first two articles:

"The End of Solution Sales"

Brent Adamson, Matthew Dixon, and Nicholas Toman

"Dismantling the Sales Machine"

Brent Adamson, Matthew Dixon, and Nicholas Toman



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