

Are You Trying to Control the King?

by John Golden





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One of the greatest misconceptions is the idea of “being in control,” because so many aspects of life are partially or completely beyond our control. For instance, we can influence our health through wise lifestyle choices, but ultimately, we cannot control such things as the aging process, or whether or not certain afflictions are visited upon us. But when we give up the futile quest for control over that which cannot be controlled, the results can be both liberating and revitalizing. You will often hear organizations talking about control in one form or another: controlling the sales process, forcing customers into one internally defined bucket or another, carefully managing the drip feeding of information to prospective customers, putting electronic gateways throughout the lead lifecycle. All of this is geared towards creating a managed process where the organization retains some perceived level of control.

Consider for a moment the misconception of having control and apply it to the customer. Today’s buyer, whether purchasing a cheap consumer good or a multi-million dollar professional services contract, is operating from a position of unprecedented strength. This is not merely a recession-driven buyer’s market; it is a fundamental shift in the balance of power between buyer and seller that will endure and transcend any market conditions for the foreseeable future. While most sales organizations subscribe to the concept of being buyer-focused, particularly in the complex sale, it has always been accompanied by the belief that a seller can bring value to a customer at many different junctures during a sales cycle, which in turn relies on the salesperson gaining access to the buyer at these various junctures.

But what if that access is no longer as readily available? All industries are reporting that access to senior-level buyers is harder and harder to achieve. As Dr. Philip Kotler of Kellogg Graduate School of Management in Chicago points out, “Companies must pay attention to the fact that customers are getting more educated and have better tools such as the Internet at their disposal to buy with more discrimination. Power has been passing from the manufacturer to the distributor, and now is passing to the customer. The customer is king.”ⁱ

The idea of controlling or imposing your will on the king is one that historically has not worked well in politics and is even less likely to work in commerce. So let's face up to the reality that we can either pursue a futile strategy of trying to control the customer or we can willingly give up that control and look at ways of meeting the customers' needs at different junctures in the buying process according to how they want those needs met.

The "control the king" game is being played out every day in sales organizations globally. You have probably experienced it yourself: You downloaded information about a product or a company... and were promptly contacted by a salesperson who saw you as a prospect.

It may be tempting to think "our company doesn't do that" but we see the following scenario played out daily in sales organizations:

- i. A person visits a company's website for information.
- ii. The person's information is captured and is then handed to the sales force by marketing as a "lead."
- iii. A sales rep follows up with this lead and gets no response, despite many attempts.
- iv. Sales starts seeing future leads from marketing as low value and a time drain.
- v. Marketing gets frustrated at all of the leads that are not called and converted to opportunities.
- vi. Marketing presents a report to senior management highlighting all of the leads they generate that are not being followed up on by sales.
- vii. Senior management asks the sales managers why leads are not being followed up on.
- viii. Sales managers tell salespeople to follow up on all leads from marketing and start calling immediately.
- ix. The division between sales and marketing widens a little further.

The most important person in this shuffle, the customer, becomes annoyed and alienated because a simple download has resulted in a call from a salesperson, a call that the customer does not value because it has come too early. The customer is not being interacted with in the way that he/she wants.

This is an all too common case of trying to control the king.

This requires a fundamental rethink of how most organizations approach sales and marketing. As Steve Woods, CTO and Founder of Eloqua, said recently in an interview, "If marketing is doing its thing and sales is doing its thing and the buyer is doing its own thing, you get these major communication disconnects that leave the buyer frustrated and with an ineffective experience." ⁱⁱ The buyer decides the seller is "hard to do business with" and goes elsewhere.

In their 2006 Harvard Business Review article, “Ending the War Between Sales and Marketing,” Dr. Kotler, Huthwaite founder Neil Rackham, and Suj Krishnaswamy wrote that senior managers often described “the working relationship between sales and marketing as unsatisfactory. The two functions, they say, undercommunicate, underperform, and overcomplain.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Has anything changed since 2006? Huthwaite’s 2011 global research into sales and marketing relationships, with data from 6,400 sales and marketing executives across multiple industries, suggests that fewer than 10 percent of sales executives are happy with the number and the quality of leads generated by their marketing teams. More than 80 percent of the surveyed businesses that didn’t hit their sales targets blamed lead quality on marketing.^{iv} So the conflict Kotler wrote about in 2006 has not been resolved. And yet we are in a period when the buyer is in the ascendency at unparalleled levels. Something needs to change, and quickly.

It is Huthwaite’s position that this change needs to begin and end with the focus firmly on the buyer. Buyers today engage in the buying process on their own terms and often only allow a salesperson into that process once it is quite far down the track. That is not to say that your organization cannot engage with and influence the buyer earlier in the process. You can, but to do so you need to understand the concept of the revenue continuum and align your sales and marketing organizations to be able to play effective roles in this continuum at the right time and in the right way. This is not simply coming up with lead definition and then making the process of getting the lead to sales more efficiently in some neat hand-off that satisfies an internal need for role demarcation. Instead, it is a fundamental realignment and recognition that both groups play critical, symbiotic roles in the revenue continuum and that their roles have been forever changed by the dictates of the customer.

In many ways both disciplines have been going through changes, but these changes are happening somewhat independently of each other, which is not addressing the interdependent nature of the solution to the “customer is king” challenge. For example, Lynette Ryals in her excellent book *Managing Customers Profitably* says, “Marketing is no longer considered to be an art form in which aesthetics and creativity are all-important and it is uncouth to ask questions about the financial returns. Instead, some serious misjudgments that companies have made about marketing spending have spawned an era in which marketing is regarded as a measurable science.”^v There has been an explosion in marketing automation technologies, ROI tools and new ways of examining buyer behavior such as “digital body language.”^{vi} These have all helped to bring the science of marketing to the forefront, but in many organizations this revolution is happening in a vacuum because of the lack of a shared sales-and-marketing vision of the buyer and the revenue continuum.

On the sales side, there is a lot of discussion now about how salespeople can create real value in a world where buyers are increasingly able and willing to research products and solutions on their own. One example is the new book by Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson, *The Challenger Sale*, which focuses on the salesperson “pushing customers’ thinking, introducing new solutions to their problems and illuminating

problems customers overlook.”^{vii} While such additions to the field are timely and welcome in their own right, just like the efforts underway to change the way marketing approaches the buyer, they also bring sharply into focus the reasons why both disciplines need to redefine themselves collectively and not just individually.

Most sales organizations will tell you that they strive for efficiency and nimbleness to be more customer-focused, yet on closer examination it is often the case that internal process definition, internal role delineation and neat sequential workflows are disproportionately relied upon to deliver this efficiency and nimbleness. This is particularly true because sales and marketing alignment initiatives are often thought of as a form of lead definition and identifying hand-off points. This worked to some degree when marketing owned the demand generation phase of the Buying Cycle™ the “Changes Over Time” period. This is where marketing campaigns were targeted regardless of whether it was a prospect or an existing customer. Once the target reacted he or she was turned over to the sales team and the cycle began in earnest (see Figure I). Of course this process has led to endless rounds of sales and marketing meetings to define what a “hot” versus “warm” versus downright “frigid” lead is while overlooking the fact that the buyer, not the seller, is in control of this process and that the process is being redefined without the sellers’ input.

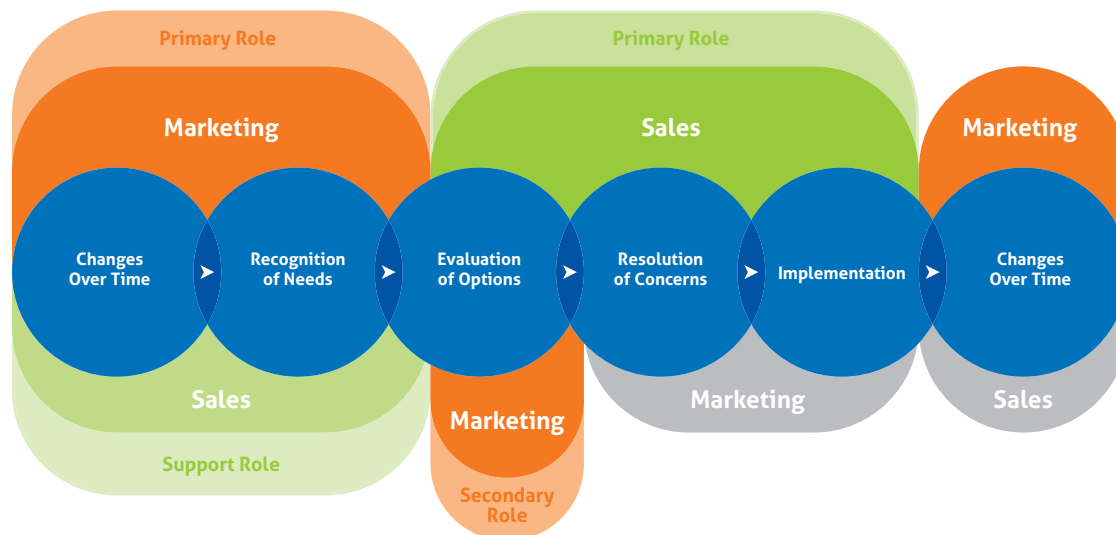
Figure I: A traditional delineation of sales and marketing during the Buying Cycle



As David Meerman Scott puts it, “Now that we find ourselves in a real-time revolution, businesspeople are feeling their way forward in search of new truths. The laws have changed. The road signs are gone. It’s like trying to drive across America with a map made in 1950, before the Interstate system.”^{viii} The idea of this real-time revolution encapsulates a lot of what I am talking about here. In a real-time world where buyers want a buying experience that is responsive to their specific needs at any given point in the cycle, a neatly defined and delineated sales and marketing process is unlikely to have the flexibility and speed to deliver.

To become truly buyer-focused, we have to look at the buyer through the lens of the revenue continuum, where sales and marketing partner or easily swap primary and secondary roles based on the real-time needs of the buyer. This process more resembles the model in Figure II, where at different stages of the process sales or marketing may take the lead in working with the buyer, but at no stage is the other totally removed from the process. Not only are they not completely removed, but during the crucial handover period they are working in partnership to ensure a seamless transfer that keeps the buyer’s experience and needs front and center.

Figure II: Sales and marketing aligned



In this aligned approach there is a careful balance between being proactive and reactive. During the early stages of the revenue continuum the buyer is often somewhat satisfied with business as usual. Sometimes this provides an opportunity for a salesperson to engage with them and have exploratory conversations to uncover unforeseen needs. More often than not, with time always at a premium, buyers are more likely to be jolted out of business as usual by market events, something read on a blog, or something passed on by someone in their professional network. Marketing, however, can help in this process by using the ever-increasing array of communication platforms to prompt and probe the buyer. Blogs, whitepapers, podcasts, webinars, e-newsletters, and case studies can all be used for this purpose. The challenge is that this can be like fishing—trying different kinds of bait until you get a bite—and in this real-time market you have to switch bait rapidly if it is not working. This is where agility comes into play.

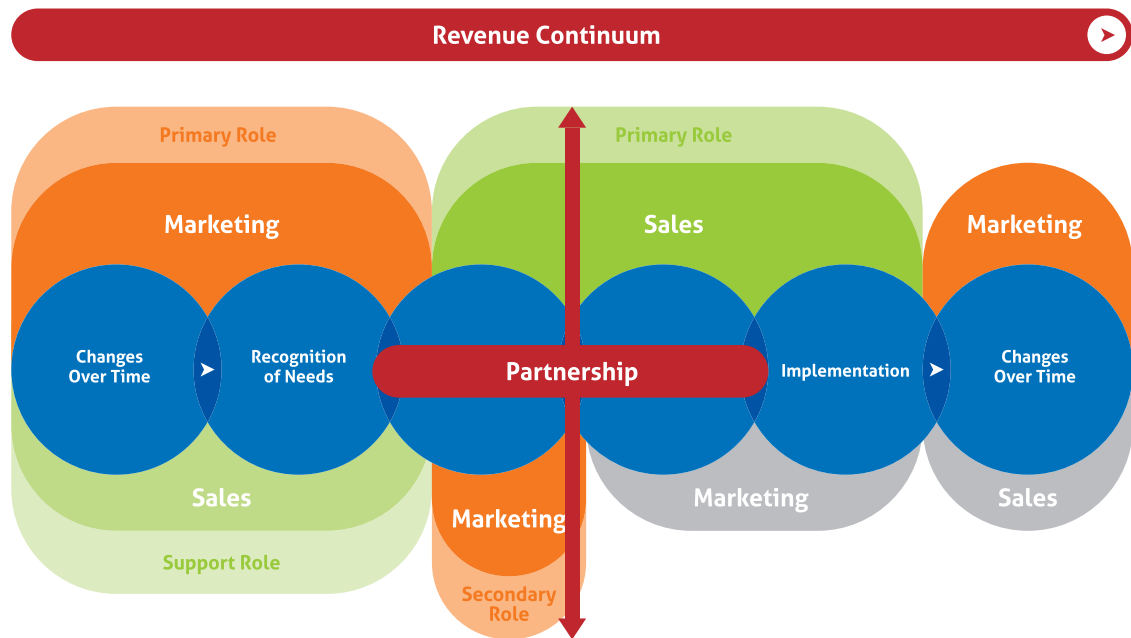
Once marketing gets a bite, the challenge is not how quickly it can be turned over to sales, but determining what the bite represents. This is traditionally the moment when organizations start to apply gateways and attempt to control the flow of information to the prospective buyer in return for information to help engage the seller. Here again we come back to the issue of control. Bartering information with a prospect is not a buyer-focused approach! All we are doing is frustrating prospects and driving them to look elsewhere. This is the moment to relinquish the idea of control and replace it with enablement.

For this to work, marketing has to be prepared to go further into the buying process than has been the norm. This requires them to understand and adopt many of the traditional skills and tactics of salespeople. In other words, marketers need to be able to communicate with buyers in ways that allow them to uncover and develop needs. Instead of bartering information, we must provide the information the buyer is looking for, and then go a step further to clarify the business driver, ask some

thought-provoking questions, and share some insights. In other words, provide value in every engagement with the buyer regardless of what medium is used (phone, email, blog sites, Twitter, LinkedIn groups, etc.).

A series of focus groups Huthwaite conducted with customers during 2011 confirmed that organizations are beginning to realize that marketing now has an increased selling role as they help the buyer through more stages of the process than in the past. Our focus groups also concluded that sales forces need an even deeper level of skill and business acumen to maximize those direct interactions with the buyer that are at such a premium. Both sales and marketing need to operate in the manner outlined in Figure III.

Figure III: Sales and marketing operating in partnership to create the revenue continuum



Marketing needs to adopt a messaging strategy that is buyer-focused. The days of generic, catch-all messages are behind us. Buyer-focused messaging requires marketing to have a combination of client, industry and market knowledge. Where “Unique Selling Propositions” or “Single Nets” developed by ad agencies can often be generic and uninspiring, messages that are buyer-focused and create demand are carefully constructed so that they:

- i. **Resonate**—demonstrate how the seller’s solutions solve high-value problems and provide opportunities
- ii. **Motivate**—attract attention because they speak to the customer at the right point in their decision-making process
- iii. **Differentiate**—make the customer decision easy by highlighting what is unique about the seller’s solutions ^{ix}

These outcomes have traditionally been achieved through the direct engagement of a salesperson but now can be achieved through a marketing engagement (which is often what the buyer wants). This requires sales and marketing to work together to carefully identify the right moment for sales to get more directly involved in the process and eventually take it over. There is no hard hand-off point; rather it is a partnering exercise where one transitions into a support role as the other transitions into a primary role. It also means that when salespeople take over, they should already know enough about the buyer and the buyer's situation to quickly go deeper and bring immediate value to the equation.

This last point is important: It is a mistake to assume that because marketing is going further with the buyer than before, the role and skills of the salesperson are diminished. On the contrary, the new reality requires that salespeople become more highly skilled, because they need to be able to have well-informed, business-focused discussions from the start and quickly build targeted solutions. The probability that their opportunities for direct engagement will be reduced means that those interactions need to be of the highest value possible.

The customer is king, and is beyond our control. Kings must have what they want, when they want it. If they want information, then share it with them. Before asking for something in return, try to understand why they need it so that you can provide more information to them or refer them to other helpful resources (whether they are your own resources or not). If they want to test out your product, let them. Remove the gateways that make it tedious for them to learn about your solutions. As the buying process progresses, let the transition from marketing to sales be so seamless and transparent that the buyer doesn't really notice the difference and instead sees only a company that is easy to do business with and is there to help them.

It's time to assess your sales and marketing organizations and ask yourself some hard questions:

Are your marketing resources prepared and able to go further into the buying process than before? Do your salespeople have the skill and business acumen to quickly go deeper with the buyer? Can sales and marketing work in such close partnership that the buyer's experience is smooth and seamless?

The answer to these questions will go a long way in establishing whether your organization will become a favorite of the king or be banished to the guillotine.

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Huthwaite is the world's leading sales performance improvement organization. Founded on scientifically validated behavioral research, our methodologies, which include the internationally renowned **SPIN® Selling**, guarantee sales success. Huthwaite assesses your organization's needs and develops customized sales performance improvement and coaching programs that drive real business results.





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