Breaking the sales pigeon hole

You are frustrated with being pigeon holed. With justification.

You take great care of your customer, who agrees you delight them. Yet, this customer only buys your product A, but not service B – a fantastic offering. You are being pigeon holed. Why?

To make it worse, often the customer only buys what they “must”, because you have a unique/defendable position. What about the rest of your line? Shouldn’t sales team members earn more share of wallet? In fact, one way to gauge a relationship is to observe is the customer is buying items they “don’t need to buy”.

We know, in theory, it’s generally easier to sell more product to an existing customer than to open a new customer. You are a vendor of record, a known quantity. But, sometimes, you wouldn’t know this selling truth looking at your sales reports. When you are pigeon holed.

You need two at least two elements to break the pigeon hole:

1) The standard breakthrough approach you would use in opening any customer

2) Overcoming the sales team’s internal pigeon holing, which completes a tragic alliance.

This second point is critical. Salespeople fear to lose what they have. So, they settle for half a loaf. “I don’t want to ruin the relationship, they reason.” Some relationship! Particularly, if customers only buys those things they must buy.

In this instance, it’s may not be so much the customer who pigeon holes us, as the salesperson who agrees to a “tragic alliance”.

The buyer wants to “spread the wealth” to mitigate risk, or perhaps is loyal to your competitor on service B. If your sales team agrees this is reasonable, you will never break the pigeon hole. We won’t get supply any more items, because we are vacating the playing field.

If you believe the decision-maker is making a sub-optimal decision for the organization – whether motivated by convenience or by loyalty – you may need to escalate to a higher level, perhaps the C-Suite. This is risky. You may truly burn an important relationship.

This scenario points to the importance of always building bridges to the C-Suite, from the outset. Then, you aren’t dependent on a single channel of influence. With higher level connections, you can drop a note to a C-Suite connection, keeping him/her abreast of new developments.

Assume you don’t have any higher-level connections and want to break the pigeon hole. What case must you present to your “regular” contact/decision-maker?

If you don't want to wait for your competitor to stub their toe, you need to be pro-active, entrepreneurial. A reliable formula for a pro-active program is: bold vision, bold behavior, addressing risk needs. Let's consider what this entails, point by point.

Bold vision – a raison d'etre – a reason for being. A material difference, a difference so strong it commands the decision-maker's attention, puts us on the playing field. Bold vision is coin of the realm to earn the right to access and influence. Be prepared to monetize your stated advantages to make them obvious, in an economic justification. Too many salespeople rely on the "Ben Franklin" approach – listing the positives and negatives. If it isn't obvious to the prospect, you will be blocked.

Bold vision lies dormant without **bold behavior**, when you face resistance. We must strongly convey the bold vision to the customer, even in the face of resistance. In fact, what typically distinguishes the top salespeople is the ability to coach a prospect from resistance to exploration.

With bold vision and bold behavior, we earn the right to necessary fact finding, to discover the prospect's closing conditions for the new product or service – to break the pigeon hole. Once we know the closing conditions, we can determine if we have a strong fit and proceed to prove our case. Inevitably, there are risk needs and possibly switching costs, which must be addressed. Even though in general terms we are a known quantity, the competitor's solution is typically seen as a no risk proposition.

Note: If we don't know all the closing conditions, we can never be in control. The customer can buy, but we can't sell. And in this case, the customer won't buy – they don't want to change.

How do we address risk needs? Ideally, the customer will tell us, when we have earned the right to the information.

Typical risk mitigation strategies include: test drives, samples, trial runs, visiting a non-competitor using our solution, testimonials, case histories, statistics, showing how underlying processes lead to the predictable outcomes, guarantees.

In more complex sales, after satisfying the gatekeeper decision-maker, we may have to repeat this process with other decision-makers – to break the pigeon hole.

Seems like a lot of work, doesn't it?

Better for us to do the right thing from day 1, develop multiple points of contact at customers with bold vision, bold behavior. Then, there's less heavy lifting downstream, when we want to break the pigeon hole.