

When and What Is Your First Touch with Buyers?

By John Holland, Co-author and Co-founder of CustomerCentric Selling®

A CEO recently shared the opinion that his company typically had a four-month sales cycle that took some prospects years to get ready for. The current trend is for buyers to contact sellers later in the sales cycle and for them to be fairly knowledgeable about the offerings they are interested in due to multiple visits to different websites. Have you considered how to “nurture” people who may not be ready to buy in the short term?

Prior to the internet and associated search engines, salespeople and their companies were the keepers of information about current and future offerings. It was fairly common for prospects or customers to invite market leading vendors in on an annual basis to learn about industry trends and the direction offerings would take. This afforded an opportunity to get involved early in what could become a buying cycle and influence the buyers’ requirements.

While it is flattering to be invited by companies to “tell us about industry trends and what you are doing to respond to them,” many of these meetings or presentations were more vendor-centric than customer-centric. Often salespeople brought people up to speed on their offerings without learning much about the customer requirements.

As the internet became increasingly important, vendors began using their websites to post what amounted to electronic brochures. Few website made any attempt to do interest processing for visitors. Over the last several years, the internet has enabled buyers to be knowledgeable about offerings **prior** to having to contact a salesperson. Today when contacted, a reasonable first step is for sellers to understand what the buyer has seen and what their requirements are before diving into a sales cycle. I call this first step interest processing.

When did you last review your website and the customer experience it provides? The probability of your salespeople being contacted and the quality of the initial conversation may be highly dependent upon your website’s content and presentation. In his book ‘Escaping the Black Hole’ Bob Schmonsees cites instances where companies provide so much detail about their offerings including pricing that they lose opportunities without their salespeople having an opportunity to have a conversation with the prospect.

CustomerCentric Selling® believes a lead is a Key Player (committee member in a decision) who is interested in discussing a business issue that your offering may help them achieve. Many of our clients set the generation of a lead as an objective for their website visitors. To do so you may want to consider the following:

- What titles do you want to try to attract to your website?
- Can you learn a visitor’s title/function early in their visit?
- If identified, can you channel them toward gaining interest in one of more of their business objectives?
- How much detail about your offerings and pricing do you want to provide?
- Do you provide a path for an “ongoing electronic dialogue” with visitors?

In the same way your customers and prospects have leveraged the internet to be more informed buyers, your company might be able to gain a competitive advantage by improving the customer experience when visiting your site.