

Improving Your Competitive Arsenal

By Carol Ann Livernoche

I was conducting a workshop this week, and as we were going around the room asking about each participant's objectives for the session, one person said; "I want pixie dust". (*Don, thanks for the inspiration*). As we all laughed about this a bit, we went on to discuss how, while not all that practical, it is what we often seek with competitive positioning.

Unfortunately, there are no "silver bullets" or "pixie dust" when it comes to competitive differentiation, but there are some basics that can create the perception of advantage early in the process that we sometimes overlook.

Preparation

In the early stages of selling to a large prospect, we were given 30 minutes for an initial meeting. We discussed how to best leverage a short amount of time to get our key points across. Our sales representative on the deal decided to create an agenda for our time together. When we arrived, before we ever started the discussion, the prospect commented on how refreshing it was that we prepared and arrived with an agenda, even though we had a very brief time scheduled. They are now a customer and this brings to light the first point about competitive positioning. It wasn't about the products or services, but all about preparation and valuing the time that the prospect had given us.

Confidence

We have this tendency to focus on what the competition has that we don't and how we are going to elevate our status and minimize theirs. Competitive positioning begins with how you present yourself and your organization. "No one will ever be more excited about your product than you are". With that in mind, preparation helps you to build confidence in the points you want to make, and even the things you may have to defend.

Alignment

In our workshops, we talk about organizations that are focused on:

- Cost Leadership
- Product/Service Excellence
- Customer Intimacy

Knowing what is important to the buyer in a relationship helps to define the strategy that will be most effective in convincing them that you are the best alternative for this project, for their team and their overall organization.

Be clear with your competitive positioning and align your advantages to their business needs. Don't just "throw something on the wall and hope it sticks". It is your responsibility to make sure that they "get it" and understand why it is important to their project and their business.

Anticipation

You know that there will always be advantages for pursuing another alternative. Whether this is to do nothing, do it themselves, - or buy from another provider, it is important to anticipate what you are competing against. Grab a colleague and ask them to be a buyer and punch holes into your positioning. Ask them to give you the tough questions. Think about how you would approach this opportunity if you were the advocate of an alternative solution. This will help arm you with the ammunition that you need to bury competitive alternatives.

Understanding

Ask prospects what has made previous experiences good or bad. Ask them about the things that are important to them with a business relationship. Ask people that recently bought from you why they chose you – what you did well, and how you can improve. Knowing vs. guessing or assuming makes for a much stronger competitive message.

When all is said and done, competitive advantage is in the eye of the buyer. Their perception about what better suits their needs depends upon how well you understand what those needs are.

There is no need to feel like you are all - alone or have to have “pixie dust” to win a deal. Collaboration with the customer and putting their time and needs first is the foundation to creating a positive impression and a lasting customer relationship.