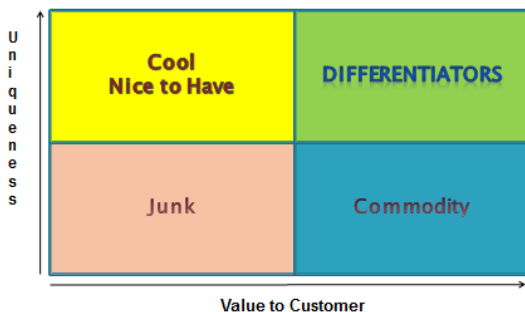# The Competitive Edge

Ten Tips To Find That Magic Bullet

During my workshops, I often display a competitive quadrant and ask participants to list anything about their company, their solutions or their products that is unique and of value to the customer. In addition, I ask them to do all that in five words or less per differentiator. Chaos ensues as opinions blur with market-ese that blurs with cold facts.

The Competitive Map

Very few companies now have magic competitive bullets that automatically shut down the competition. It is just not that easy. So how, as a lowly Sales Engineer, can you engage in hand-to-hand combat out there in the trenches and what can you do to give yourself a competitive edge?

1. **Tell The Truth.** As the technical wing of the sales force, your credibility is everything. Once you get caught in an apparent non-truth (OK, a lie), you are finished in that account. If you handle major accounts, that could impact many future opportunities within that account. BUT – telling the truth doesn't mean volunteering the truth on all occasions. An important distinction younger SE's often forget.

2. **Forget The Magic Silver Bullet.** When was the last time you walked into a customer's office, gave a presentation/demo, listed your competitive advantages … and the customer slapped their forehead and said "of course I should buy from you"? Everything is situational - and the more you know about your customer and their business the more likely you are to uncover a useful nugget or two that will help you. (If you truly have a silver bullet – enjoy the feeling, you have about 6 months left to make as much money as you can.)

3. Walk A Mile In Their Shoes. Your competition is not stupid, so don't make that assumption. They probably list as advantages many of the same items that you do. So if you were selling their solution – what would you do? Contrast that with what they actually do – and examine the differences. (For months at Business Objects, I wondered why Cognos <#1 competitor> did not highlight a feature in their product that could clearly translate into a major business advantage. Eventually we thought that either it didn't work or was incompatible with what they were selling. We were proved correct – and started to show our supposedly "weaker" equivalent to our advantage). As a postscript my youngest daughter told me that "*if you're angry at someone you should walk a mile in their shoes. If you're still angry at them – you're now a mile away and have taken their shoes – what are they going to do?*"

4. Adapt based on size. Small competitors should force larger competitors to react and make decisions quickly. Change the scope of a POC, add a scenario to a demo at the last minute, change dates, change configurations. Larger competitors should both expand the sale (add products and services and other departments) and bury smaller competitors in work. Set tight timelines and send in multiple SE's, sit an SE onsite for a week to babysit an account, and run concurrent trials in the same geography to soak up technical resources.

5. Inside Knowledge #1. With very few exceptions, I've rarely been impressed with the quality of Competitive Intelligence (CI) from Product Marketing. There are two reasons; firstly, it's just positively and extremely spun information – like comparing our next release to their current release; and secondly it's too abstract and difficult to use. When a competitor is giving you trouble, look through blogs, wikis, support forums and you will be amazed what you find. Sign up for seminars and webcasts (be yourself – don't lie) to see how they pitch their stuff. Should you really be doing this? Probably not, but since SE's are the organization of last resort you'll probably have to.

6. Inside Knowledge #2. Ask questions! It's been scientifically proved that the best way to get information from people is to ask them questions. Ask your customers, ask your prospects, ask your partners.. about their perspectives and thoughts on your competitor. Again – you'd be surprised at what you can learn with a little insight. Now multiply that by the number of SE's in your team and it's a powerful force. Harness it with a well-designed and searchable intranet/wiki/SharePoint site and magic can happen.

7. **Internalize The Information.** You may be 20% faster, support twice as many formats and consume 33% less power. So what? The next step is to build a "*so what that means to you, Mr. Customer, is that in your environment you'll be able to/you'll experience..*" statement. Help you customer make the leap between the abstract (20% faster) and the concrete (*you'll now be able to meet your backup window and have an hour to spare – which is what you said you wanted to achieve*).

8. **Make It Memorable**. There is an old adage "*if they cannot repeat it, then they do not get it*". If your customer cannot explain why you are a better choice than your competitor, (or even better than Do Nothing Inc.), how can they justify the purchase. Do you have your 60-90 second **why we are so great** pitch ready to go?

9. **Money Is The Universal Currency**. We're all trained to sell "solutions" and to concentrate on "added business value" and Return On Investment. That's because one hard dollar/pound/euro delivered this year is better than two soft units delivered next year. When looking at a competitive solution it is your job to translate your technology into more revenue, less cost and lower risk. Money, with an assist from gravity, is what makes the world go around.

10. **Don't Be A Competitive Leak!** Yes – that means you. Be careful about what you post online, tweet, blog or even leave behind with a client/partner. Think about the CI flows into your company, and reflect on point #3 – your competitor id doing the same.

Summary

A good chess player thinks several moves ahead; a great chess player already has a dozen variations planned from the first opening moves. The master **pre**pares and **pre**dicts what the competitor will do. That's part of the **pre** in pre-sales. Throw in some credibility, confidence and adaptability when faced with hand-to-hand combat and you'll be better placed to get both the mythical technical win and the profitable business win.

"Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake"

Napoleon Bonaparte, French military/political leader (1769-1821)

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.