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The Challenger Sales Engineer

Why Challenger Is A Best Practice For The SE

The Challenger Sale has really had an impressive impact on the high technology salesforce. About 50% of my clients have adopted it as an overlay for their current sales process. So what does Challenger mean to the Sales Engineering team, and how does it change their relationship with the customer and with the salesperson?

I believe that the SE is actually in the best position of anyone within the sales team to institute Challenger's practices and execute them most effectively. The SE just needs the courage, the self-belief, the corporate/cultural permission, and a little training to do this. So let's look at some great reasons why the Sales Engineer should love and embrace the Challenger Sale.

A Quick Executive Summary Of The Challenger Sale.

Through authors Matt Dixon and Brett Adamson, the Corporate Executive Board released [The Challenger Sale](#) in November 2011. They studied the successes (and failures) of thousands of salespeople and classified those reps into five buckets – The Hard Worker, The Challenger, The Relationship Builder, The Lone Wolf, and The Problem Solver. The research shows that the Challenger (has a different view, understands business, loves to debate, and pushes the customer) was the most successful model. Although The Lone Wolf came in a strong second! No surprise and I know that every good SE understands this; customers value insight, news, advice, and even challenges – when delivered by the appropriate person with the proper knowledge.

Reason #1: The SE IS More Likely To Hit The Target

An earlier Talking Point showed some interesting data about customer preferences that I'm reprinting here:

Throughout your technology purchase process, which of these sources/groups provided the most value to you and your team? (%) values			
Customer Position	Middle Management	IT - Individuals	CxO / Executives
General Collateral	25.1	22.6	16.2
Salesperson / Manager	21.3	18.8	22.6
Technical Team	39.7	46.8	42.1
Executives	13.9	1011.8	19.1

Source: Mastering Technical Sales 4th Edition Research – May 2021

Your customers prefer to hear from you more than anyone else – even your executives. Therefore, you have a better chance of hitting that "challenger" target, as they are likelier to listen to you. What a great advantage!

Reason #2: It Is Natural Behavior For The SE

The natural inclination of the SE is to help their customer; as to quote Jack Welch, former CEO of GE (USA), "*One thing we have discovered with certainty is that anything we do that makes the customer more successful inevitably results in a financial return for us.*" That is the difference between direct selling and "assisting." A good SE can master that difference and use it to their advantage. It is hard for a quota-driven, manager-driven salesperson to put the selling aside.

Reason #3: It Works Best With Humility Rather Than Arrogance

Sales take the Challenger Sale and try to disrupt the customer and their thought process, which can be a very unpleasant experience. The more directly you challenge, the more you need to be 100% accurate and on-point. Telling a small hedge fund how you helped Goldman Sachs or a luxury retailer what you did for a discount chain store may be of little more than curiosity value to that customer if you don't approach it correctly. The Challenge can (and I have seen it happen) blow up in your face if you don't know enough about your customer's business. People are naturally defensive when challenged. The standard line of "*can I share with you some of the initiatives my other customers are taking.*" plays much better from the SE.

Reason #4: You Gain More Control Of The Sales Cycle.

The Challenger Sale states that customers now enter the sales cycle when it is about 57% completed. That means most internal research, assessment, and needs analysis are complete and justified. (Think how much research we now do online before buying a car compared to 10 years ago). Therefore, the customer does not need to see or hear material available on your website or other public locations.

Your value comes in understanding their business and relating that back to your "solution," and then making the simple business case. It is your job to prove that you are uniquely qualified to solve their business problem – AS DEFINED BY THE CUSTOMER AND THEN ADAPTED, WITH THEIR AGREEMENT, BY YOU. That means letting go of the standard demonstration and PowerPoints and having some insightful conversations instead. Unfortunately, that behavioural style is not always the most straightforward approach for the techie SE.

Reason #5: It's Good For Your Career

There will always be a job for the super-technical, amazing-demo, Proof-Of-Concept-guru style SE. We need them, as someone has to make the product stand on its head and work. Yet – the tidal wave of demand is for the business-oriented SE who matches the technology and business together AND can communicate that in a way that makes sense to the customer.

There is a worldwide shortage of Sales Engineers, and a talent war has been quietly brewing for the past 18 months. Large tech companies (Oracle, HP, Dell, VMware) are now building their own SEs using graduate intake programs. Many mid-sized companies are doing the same as the economics are compelling. Salaries are rising faster than inflation almost everywhere in the world. So it is a fun time to be an SE, and the Challenger Sale's business orientation is a bankable resume item.

Reason #6: The Customer Will Remember

The SE team's average tenure (length of service) is between 2 ½ - 3 times that of the sales force. That means institutional memory resides with the SE team. For example, if you have been an SE for over 3 years; how often has a new rep asked you to introduce them to people in "their account," or have you had to explain how a deal happened 2 years ago? Even a new SE will likely touch more accounts in her first year than a rep.

That knowledge has value – you know how things work, you understand why certain decisions were made (my friend AI says he knows "where the bodies are buried!"), and you should have an arsenal of customer success stories to share. For the most part, jobs in the corporate world turn over (other than promotions) at a slower rate than hi-tech sales, so your customer will remain the constant, and your relationship will build over time, as long as you make an effort. And that is where the "permission" and "corporate/culture" noted in the opening paragraphs come in. The SE has to proactively reach out, build relationships independently of the rep, and even make calls themselves.

Summary

The introduction of the Challenger Sale presents an excellent opportunity for the SE team to reassert themselves in the customer relationship and break away from just being a technical resource. There is a crisis in sales right now as reps struggle to cope with the better-educated buyer and

"Never let a good crisis go to waste.."

- Rahm Emanuel, Mayor of Chicago

Talking Points is a sporadic 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.

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