



How the Best CMOs Master the Challenger Sale

In *The Challenger Sale: Taking Control of the Customer Conversation*, Matthew Dixon and Brent Adams present a strong case for a sales/business development effort that challenges prospects to think differently about their business challenges.

We agree. We've seen it work time and time again. But it only works when B2B CMOs develop a clear and differentiated point of view that salespeople can easily express. You can't just march in there and tell prospects, "you're doing it wrong". That's not being a Challenger: that's just being annoying.

Here's how Marketing can make every part of the Challenger Sale work smarter.

The Warmer: Don't be Generic. Be Specific.

Be specific. Arm Sales to talk with confidence about the big issues that face your prospect's industry – especially the ones that your product or service is amazing at solving. Then, go deeper. Arm them to talk about how those specific issues impact that specific prospect. Remember that a trend that is a dream situation for one company in an industry is a nightmare for another.

In our practice, we arm our clients and their sales teams with Talk Tracks: easy-to-skim-before-a-sales-call documents that give sales reps the key issues facing each industry or segment they will talk with. Without these, salespeople have to fish for this

information. This turns prospects cold: they know you're trying to qualify them, not help them. Worse, you're wasting their time because you haven't done your homework. To make these even more effective, help your sales team know what stories competitors are likely to spin and how to counteract them (see Your Solution below).

Arm your sales team to walk into the room already up-to-date on the key issues, and make "warming" happen quickly and naturally.

The Reframe: Develop A Uniquely Memorable Concept

Connecting their challenges to a bigger problem or opportunity they hadn't considered sounds easy, but remember: your prospects are very smart people who have thought about this a lot. What can Sales possibly bring to the table that your prospects haven't considered?

Marketing needs to do the foundational strategic work required to develop a truly compelling story. You can't execute The Reframe with a generic story like "It's raining, and so you need an umbrella." That's old-fashioned solution selling, not a Challenger sale.

You need to offer a genuinely new POV. What unforeseen obstacle will your prospect encounter on the road to success? Alternatively, what is the hidden opportunity that your prospect is uniquely well-positioned to pursue? Your goal is to identify an obstacle or opportunity that is undeniably real and can only really be dealt with by buying your product or service. Then you have to turn it into an easily expressed, memorable Concept. The Concept should:

- Have a "handle" (a slogan or headline) that summarizes it;
- Give prospects a mental picture of the obstacle to overcome and/or opportunity they have before them, and signal the path to the solution (a powerful tactic is to have a "Bar Napkin" graphic: a simple picture of the problem and solution that can be sketched on bar napkin, used in sales PPT, etc); and
- Put forth a metric -- whether real or implied -- that sets the prospect thinking (see the next stage: Rational Drowning)

We've met one or two rock star sales execs who can instinctively deliver these kinds of stories to marketing on a silver platter, but they are few and far between. The burden of crafting the right story is solidly on the CMO. But it's tough for Marketing to devote the right kind of time to the task. And, it's hard to maintain an outsider's perspective from inside any company. The value of partnering with smart B2B marketing consultants is that they are far enough outside your company to see things clearly, but can work closely with you to develop stories that are on-brand, can be enthusiastically embraced within your company, and unlock sales opportunities.

Rational Drowning: Create an Ownable Metric

Showing the prospect the hard numbers behind why they need to think differently is critical, but – like all of this – it's easier said than done.

You can't "Rationally Drown" a smart prospect in a puddle. You can't cherry-pick only the facts that support your case. The numbers need to be deep enough that they are undeniable, and they need to come from trusted third-party sources.

If those numbers exist, great. If they don't exist, you may need to partner with a University or industry analyst to create them. Or do your own research. You're looking for an ownable number or metric. You might even be able to name it (e.g. "The X Inflection Point", or whatever). Prospects should credit you with bringing it to their attention, and should associate that metric with you when they invoke it later.

Often, an otherwise very convincing Reframing falls apart once you stop using words and start using numbers. It is at this moment that Marketing needs to have the courage to discard an appealing but weak Reframing and look for a strong one. For this reason, it's best not to fall in love too early.

It's tempting to gloss over this step – it can be expensive, it's not glamorous, and it often means discarding pet theories. But it's worth the investment to get it right.

Emotional Impact: Sell To The Whole Room

Tying the pain in the story to the pain felt inside the organization is key, and everyone will tell you so. It can be the easiest part of the sale –but only if you've done the other steps correctly.

If you have truly identified the right industry issues, reframed them in a way that your product or service is the only realistic solution, and have the numbers that make it undeniable, then the major task here is to understand what emotion is most likely to influence a given prospect. Is it:

- FOMO (fear of missing out)?
- The ability to score an easy, visible win?
- The need to outperform?
- The fear of operational disruptions when adopting something new?
- A general fear or change?

Remember that there are always multiple audiences for any B2B sale, and that there may not just be one emotion at work. What the CFO cares about might be quite different from what the main buyer cares about. A strong story will emotionally resonate with everybody you must persuade.

A New Way: Are You The Only Logical Choice?

The “New Way” of approaching the problem should appear to be blindingly obvious: your product or solution should really be the only logical choice to address the problem that you reframed. Here again, this is much easier if Marketing has done the foundational work correctly.

If the “New Way” doesn’t tee up your product as the best possible way to address the problem you reframed, it’s best to go back to the beginning and re-think it.

(P.S. Sometimes a failed “New Way” is actually a good thing: it can help point out product and service improvements that are needed to make your Sales and Marketing efforts stronger.)

Your Solution: Are You Ready To Sell Against Specific Competitors?

Why is your solution the best? If your prospect immediately steers the conversation to price, it’s a clear signal that the prospect thinks you’re a commodity and not the one and only answer.

Remember those Talk Tracks we talked about earlier? Here’s where you add clear and concise points about competitors and how best to sell against them.

For example, “Yes, we come up against (competitor) all the time. They’re a great solution if you have (x problem or opportunity), but they are missing (key pieces of the solution the prospect needs.)”

The key to a successful “New Way” is for Marketing to make it clear that there is a continuum of Sales prospects, from companies the solution is 100% perfect for, to 100% wrong for.

The Best B2B Marketing and Sales Gimmick Is The Truth

A successful Challenger sale doesn’t work because it’s voodoo. It works because it genuinely – and undeniably -- solves a real problem the prospect didn’t realize they had. Or one they couldn’t see as clearly and with as great understanding as they do now, once you’ve made it obvious.

The job of Marketing is to find that truth -- and make it stunningly obvious. It’s never easy, but the rewards of getting it right are big.

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About the authors

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