

Customers Must Be the *Origin* of Your Selling Strategy, Not Just the Focus of It

In the past decade or so, companies have worked hard to become customer-centric. From reengineering business processes to installing CRM technology, corporations have increasingly acknowledged that the customer is their 'reason to be.' By shifting their focus onto the customer, companies have taken a critical step in their evolution toward supreme customer alignment. Rather than sitting around a conference table to formulate their business strategy, companies now at least walk over to the window to get a good look at their customer. But the time has come to evolve further . . . It is time to open the door and invite the customer to the table.

I once had a disturbing conversation with an executive of a \$10 billion global company. While discussing his customer-centric strategic planning process, he proudly informed me that he and his executive peers were preparing for their annual retreat where they "get away and really try to view themselves objectively from their customer's perspective." I am not making this up. They intentionally *isolate* themselves, to *pretend* to be their customers, to get an *objective* view of their company, to develop their sales and marketing strategy for the next year! Hopefully, you too find something unsettling about this.

Why not simply ask customers what they think? Rather than relying on an executive brainstorming session, why not do some market research? Realistically, how could this team expect to generate a customer-centric strategy without input from any customers? Unless that small group of executives was purchasing \$10 billion a year of their own distribution services, most of their customers were not present while their experiences for the next year were being defined.

While this company's strategy might ultimately be focused *on* their customers, it definitely will not have come *from* their customers. Therefore, it will not fully serve their customers' needs. Customers are the only ones who know why, when, where, and how they will buy something, so every strategic plan should be built on information obtained from them. It is our experience that every successful sales strategy is built on data gathered from extensive customer research. Otherwise, companies must resort to the ever popular method of strategy formulation – guesswork.

The thesis here is quite basic: *The customer must be the origin of your sales and marketing strategy, not just the target of it.* Customer-centric strategies can not be formulated with the customer in mind; they must be formulated with the customer in command. Do customer research. Create customer advisory councils. Build customer feedback channels. Do not believe that only thinking about your customers makes you customer-centered. In fact, becoming 'customer-centered' should no longer be a company's ultimate goal. There should be a new objective for the new century . . . The *customer-defined* organization.