

Customer Ownership? Understanding the True Value of the Relationship

Posted At : May 1, 2018 11:02 AM | Posted By : Dr. Ricky Fergurson

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In the rapidly changing landscape of B2B sales, technology, competitive intensity and rising sales support costs oblige greater attention to customer relationships. “Many companies that have an enterprise focus struggle with the concept of “owning the customer” (Weeks 2016). Given that customers are buying in different ways, firms are driven to engage customers differently. According to Cooper (2016), “customer ownership is all about creating, delivering and communicating compelling value”. In nurturing and developing customers through the B2B life cycle, multiple departments and functional units in the firm are entwined

in customer relationship management (CRM). The complexity of CRM and dynamism in customers’ relationship expectations require that sales, marketing, service and support work together through the customer buying and fulfillment process. ‘The diffusion of tasks and responsibilities exposes a fundamental CRM gap: who truly owns the customer? A recent AMA Marketing News article referred to customer ownership as “the age-old battle between marketing and sales” (Qaqish 2018). The idea of who ‘owns’ the customer relationship may become ambiguous. So, what does it mean to own a customer relationship?

Customer ownership is defined as building a level of rapport, commitment, and trust with a customer that increases dependency. The question becomes “does this dependency by the customer reside with the salesperson who they deal with regularly or with the company they purchase from?” Anecdotally consider this situation, the salesperson who you normally deal with leaves to go to another company with similar and substitutable products. Do you continue buying the same product from a different salesperson or do you buy a different product from the same salesperson you have always dealt with?

In B2B channels, most firms entrust front-line responsibilities to salespeople. Thus, the majority of customer interface occurs between salespeople and the customer which enhances the salesperson-customer bond. A convergence of personal and social forces emanates from the salesperson as well as the firm, so who owns the customer relationship, the firm or the salesperson? Gaining clarity on who owns the customer relationship is critical to maximizing customer satisfaction and the firms’ ability to develop and execute a growth strategy with the customer.

References

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