

"Depth of a Salesman"

For the past 12 years the *Harvard Business Review* has conducted an annual survey of chief sales officers-the executives in charge of their companies' selling efforts. In their 2006 survey a very clear trend emerged. Across industries buyers are behaving differently and the work required of the sales organization is becoming more complex.

It appears from the survey results that the buyer's cycle has dramatically diverged from the seller's cycle. Buyers have always had a buying cycle, starting at the point they perceive a need. Sellers have always had a selling cycle, starting at the point they identify a prospect. It used to be that these two cycles were somewhat in synch. Typically the seller, through some sort of marketing effort, created the buyer's perception of need. The buyer could then pursue that need by contacting the seller, usually for additional product information. In today's marketplace however, the buyer's buy cycle is often well underway before the seller is ever aware of what's happening.

In my work with corporate clients I have seen how this seemingly minor change often dramatically shifts the balance of power. Sales reps traditionally used to live on the valuable knowledge they held in their brains, binders and briefcases. They were the keepers of data sheets, reference lists, white papers and price lists. Whether the customer was a car owner shopping for insurance or a neurosurgeon researching a specific medical instrument – buyers used to require some sort of discussion with your sales rep. Today, all of that information is available on the Web, not just from the sellers, but also from other buyers and third parties.

This new sales paradigm has real implications for how you hire, train, and coach your salespeople. Your reps need to feel comfortable not only answering specific technical questions but they also must be prepared to provide purchase justification arguments and well thought out business cases. They need to know how to "unhook" what the buyer thinks they already know without putting the buyer on the defensive.

The concept of "consultative" selling has been eclipsed by a new paradigm which demands that your sales teams become not just consultants but contributors and eventually, true partners. Companies that are able to make this change will be handsomely rewarded with increased credibility, greater access, larger margins and more repeat business. While a good vendor only needs to provide a good product, a true sales professional and partner will provide solutions that impact performance.