

Sizzling sales

How can the channel achieve more sales success as a new world begins to dawn? **Comms Business** looks ahead

This time last year none of us could ever have predicted what lay ahead and how a virus would turn all our worlds upside down. With a vaccine being rolled out and more hope on the horizon, how will channel sales perform this year? And has the selling process changed forever?

Paul North, head of regional sales at CityFibre, feels the pandemic has accelerated trends just like many other areas of business. “The whole industry has been moving towards a more consultative and holistic approach that focuses strongly on the customer’s desired outcomes for some time. That is certainly the way our partners are approaching their opportunities now.”

He continued, “Even though it has not been easy to hold face-to-face meetings during the last few months, the sales process itself has not really changed. However, physical distancing is unlikely to be a permanent necessity and we’d expect the vital phase during which the client and the partner meet up to develop a rapport, mutual understanding, and degree of trust, to continue to be just as important as ever. That said, there is probably also going to be more flexibility about the need for physical meetings.”

David Sparrow, managing director at Blabbermouth Marketing believes it’s both a yes and no answer about the sales process changing. “The steps of your pipeline haven’t changed, but the process and tools used need to be adapted and transformed. For example, repeatability and consistency will be important with so many more conversations being

recorded. Whether online or on the phone, over-promising sellers need to rein in those over exaggerations or run the risk of souring new relationships.

“Considering web traffic is up 30 per cent across industries, research is happening sooner which means prospects have more facts in front of them before they make contact.

“Salespeople need to be more analytical and reflective moving forward too, working off data rather than ‘instincts’ or previous experience. Once a prospect is ready for a formal meeting, all the information gathered in that process should be acknowledged in consultations. Not only to ensure the conversation remains relevant and is of benefit to

the prospect, but to structure the discussion and show that you’re an active listener that truly wants to understand the prospect’s requirements.”

Anjali Saraswathyamma, European training and partner enablement manager, Tech Data, said the channel is having to sell much more through remote tools like Zoom and Teams. “Who knows if this is going to be permanent, but it is hard to imagine things completely returning to how they once were. The world has changed. Moving forward, it is much more likely organisations will have a hybrid workforce, meaning we will still be dependent on digital meeting places and online collaboration tools.”

He added, “The selling process has definitely evolved from being very product focused to a consultative approach. Solutions are created not just to solve a focused problem, but to address the business as a whole.

“This solution-based selling approach requires more intelligence and gravitas than just explaining feature and benefits. Selling is not just face to face anymore and evolved as virtual selling using platforms, tools, and software as well – this utilises technology at its best. Especially at times as now where digital work is overtaking the selling process. It is only going to evolve further as time moves and AI takes over the world.”



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Robinder Koura, partners director, Content Guru

Martyn Brownlie, channel director, Sophos, feels the selling process has changed enormously, simply because we are not face to face and the majority of work is ‘relational’. He said, “In the past, to stay in touch with a mid-sized account you would normally visit the customer’s office and go to their desk for a chat or for a more formal approach, you would run a deal clinic. Covid-19 has made us rethink how sales strategies are administered to ensure that sales teams can still build relationships remotely. An element of the current situation will be permanent.”

For Robinder Koura, partners director at Content Guru, the pandemic has heavily impacted both the type of solutions that the channel must focus on selling, and the methods needed to engage with customers and prospects. “Covid has accelerated the need for enterprises to adopt digital, flexible, cloud-based technologies to help run their business as a replacement for direct physical interaction. This shift has also affected the sales process, where channel partners have had to learn to engage their prospects via digital means, such as video conferencing, webinars, LinkedIn, and website interaction. The degree of these changes are probably not permanent, as the strength of the channel is trusted relationships partners build and nurture with their customers. However, some level of the new



Robinder Koura, Content Guru

age of digital sales engagement will surely continue on in 2021 and beyond.”

New opportunities

CityFibre’s North said some partners have started to spread their wings a little bit further. “If it is acceptable to pitch and to hold discussions over a video conference call, you can save an awful lot of travel time. This creates more efficiency within the sales team and meetings can be held once both parties feel there is a mutual benefit to do so. We’re also seeing an increase in community spirit and supporting local economies. Buying local is more important than ever and we will continue to champion this.”

Saraswathyamma, from Tech Data, agreed that being able to host meetings remotely has greatly benefited a number of different sales teams. “It cuts out the time wasted in travelling, not to mention the expense. It’s far easier to schedule meetings with larger audiences and thus in terms of the sales process, shorten the sales cycle. Lowering operating costs means greater margin and organisations can be more dynamic and flexible.

“When we look back, it is very evident that the priorities organisations had pre-pandemic changed. Organisations suddenly had to find technology solutions to allow employees to work securely from home and stay safe. Then there was a shift to driving productivity and making workspaces safe. This has been key in accelerating the digital transformation journey for many organisations.”

Sophos’ Brownlie highlighted, “As the selling process has shifted during the pandemic, this has created a new set of opportunities for people that are tech-savvy and comfortable with working remotely. They are now able to reach customers in a more efficient way, saving time, money and resource.”

For Koura, from Content

Guru, Covid has opened the eyes of many channel partners and their customers to the power of digital communication technologies which they may not have been aware of before. “Fear of the virus has accelerated the customer demand for a safe way of communicating, which digital communication, collaboration and customer experience solutions can provide. This shift in demand therefore creates a huge opportunity in 2021 for channel partners to be the trusted advisors to their customers and prospects to help them transition quickly to these new technologies.”

New skills

Simon Whatley, director of sales operations at Tollring said field sales teams are facing the biggest adjustments. “Managers will need to review how their now ‘caged’ field salespeople are coping, not just from a cost and performance perspective, but also to monitor their wellbeing. Many salespeople, highly skilled in face-to-face meetings, are now working at a desk – often isolated – and for many, the reason why they are in their job is because they didn’t plan to be desk-based. These salespeople may need new skills and greater internal communication to adapt to a desk-based role and still be effective, as well as tools to help them manage.

“It is clear that the way everyone does business has changed. We are not going to back to the way it was and the profile of a sales team has probably changed for the long-term, with most meetings taking place over video MS Teams meetings, increased interaction through chat and email, and daily communications being led by voice. The bottom line is that everyone has to change – from senior management to the most recent employees, at both a business and personal level.”

Todd Carothers, CRO, CounterPath, believes



Paul North, CityFibre

salespeople do not necessarily need a new skill set. “They can shift their focus to supporting customers’ challenges and not the delivery or other areas related to the former, non-digital approach to selling. Selling offerings digitally will provide a better user experience and enable less friction for customers to purchase and deploy.”

Matthew Worboys, business development director, channel at Gamma, believes remote selling has profoundly changed the way sales teams operate and requires a very different skill set than a traditional selling model. He said, “Salespeople who are hoping to succeed in 2021 will need to reimagine the way they work to adapt to new customer behaviours and expectations.

“For example, when approaching a customer remotely, it’s very easy for them to just ignore emails or calls. Managing remote meetings and demos remotely is also much more challenging than what we were used to. While face-to-face meetings usually have a very clear structure, it’s very easy to lose control and go off on a tangent while on a call or video call. Salespeople need to understand the difference between the two and adapt accordingly – practice and feedback play a crucial role in this aspect.

“Moreover, the ability to build rapport remotely and to empathise with customers, regardless of the channel of communications, will greatly >



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facilitate the selling process.”

Dale Parkinson, wholesale sales director, Virgin Media Business, believes now is the time for salespeople to be taking a long hard look at themselves about their approach and their skillset. “They should ask the question: ‘Am I as good as I need to be to succeed in a new normal world?’ They should be thinking about new ways to create demand for their products, inspiration for their customers and solutions which address and meet the needs of the wider customer business.

“The environment has been so fluid this year that sales training organisations haven’t

had the time to create content to help sales teams prosper in this regard. This means they need to prioritise effectively. Commercial creativity should be the top priority, alongside social selling and virtual stakeholder management.”

Fabio Albanini, head of international sales at Snom said everyone who has taken part in a virtual conference in the last few months knows that these take place under completely different rules and etiquette. “Striking a successful sales rapport must now take place remotely, without all the advantages of the face-to-face opportunities sales teams usually have. On the other hand, unlike a personal meeting, remote negotiations are more tiring for both sides and it’s easier to make the wrong purchase when you’re not sat in the same room, having someone explaining the product or providing a physical demo. Training to support the remote sales process can certainly help to provide more confidence and independence. The key to success is the ability to understand and bridge the

drawbacks and difficulties associated with the ‘new normal’ while maintaining strong customer relationships.”

Lee Driscoll, managing director for the UK and Ireland, Nuvias, advised that we all need to evolve in the digital world. “I am quite old now, so I still believe in the value of discipline, to ensure that we still do the right thing for our vendor and customer partners. Flexibility is only a positive as long as the job gets done! Additionally, I think it is as much to do with individual managers and how they manage in a remote environment.”

Fundamentals remain

Paul Taylor, sales and marketing director, Voiceflex, pointed out the process of selling has not changed for thousands of years, as “the fundamentals are and will remain the same forever”. If you’re selling a product or service, the core of your approach remains the need to communicate the benefits to the buyer.

He added, “The main change in the process of selling is the way we communicate with

current and potential buyers. Over the years it has evolved but not as much as you would think. There are five steps in the selling process: initial contact and rapport building, needs discovery, offer a solution, handle objections and close the sale, follow up and repeat business and referrals. There are subsets within the five mainline steps that need to change based on the person you are selling to, as not everyone is the same.

“However, due to Covid, the way we communicate with current and potential buyers has changed. Face-to-face meetings have stopped, and I don’t believe they will ever be as frequent as they have been in the past. In many respects this is far more productive. Communication and marketing are key.”

Positivity

Lee Broxson, sales director, Jola, said technology is playing a positive role in boosting productivity. “Nearly all of Jola’s 800 plus resellers are very comfortable with using Teams or Zoom instead of a face-to-face meeting. In fact, some would prefer it even if or when they have the chance for a more traditional meeting.

He added, “Going forward, if video is used for the majority of meetings, the implications for productivity are very positive. Salespeople can do many more calls, meetings don’t need to take as long to justify travel time, and expense budgets can be reduced.

“However simply replacing traditional meetings with video misses an opportunity. For example sales managers using Teams for recruitment and training can reduce the time of each meeting and increase the frequency. This can make the process more thorough and, in the case of for example sales role plays, more effective. Where customers, candidates and trainees agree to being recorded the opportunity to review progress, responses and behaviours is invaluable.”



Simon Whatley, Tollring