

Sales effectiveness firms: The Plague of Sameness



The genesis of this paper was the Chairman of the Board for a large training firm asking me “What’s the difference between my firm and <2nd firm we both know>? I was just reviewing their website and they say the same things we do!?”

These two firms have never competed for business, and in fact have referred business to each other. One is considered a Management Consulting firm, while the other is known more as a Sales Training firm.

As the answer to his question was starting to formulate in my mind I realized this question gets to the unspoken truth in the Sales Effectiveness industry – everyone sounds the same!

While this paper was written directly to my friends who own or lead sales consulting and training firms, it will hopefully be valuable to buyers of sales effectiveness services as well.

What follows are thoughts on why firms sound so similar, where there are (or should be) differences, and a few starter ideas on what actions they should be taking. I’ll also take a brief foray to the Bermuda’s Triangle for differentiators.

By

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Why everyone sounds the same

Business Drivers

Most firms selling solutions to VPs Sales that address “sales effectiveness” will talk about similar business/value drivers. The über-Drivers are typically around Increasing Revenue, Decreasing Costs, and Reducing Risks.

More specific drivers are often variations of these:

- Drive Profitability
- Accelerate Revenue Growth
- Hit the revenue target we promised the Board
- Implement new strategic/ key account program
- Improve forecast accuracy and predictability
- Launch new products or into new markets
- Transform sales organization
- Adapt to new sales approach/model
- Decrease Cost of Client Acquisition/ Cost of Sale
- Recruit, On-board, Develop, Retain Key Talent
- Recruit, On-board, Develop, Retain Key Partners
- Improve sales management effectiveness
- Improve sales productivity, efficiency, effectiveness
- Improve Channel Effectiveness
- Align Sales with Marketing/ Channel/ Product/ HR / Professional Services/ Customer Success
- Make our sellers suck less¹



Business Outcomes

And the business outcomes promised to clients are typically tied to the same metrics, such as:

- Improve revenue/rep
- Increase average deal size
- Improve margins / reduce discounting
- Improve win rate
- Increase up-sell, cross-sell, renewal, and retention rates
- Improve forecast accuracy
- Decrease cost of sale/lower cost of customer acquisition
- Decrease time to productivity
- Shorten sales cycle length
- Decrease unwanted attrition

¹ OK, I made this one up, but it's real, even if it's left unsaid

Business Problems

These firms will also often state they solve the same business problems. These are initiatives to address either Pain or Gain.

These are very common to hear:

Overall Business/Environment Changes

- Transition from Product to Solution-led Sale to Outcome-led to Insight-led sale
- New Leader, New Sales Strategy
- New Product Launch
- Investment in New sales and Marketing Technology
- Preparing for IPO/Exit
- Competitive/market changes
- Sustaining Rapid Growth
- New Disruptive Competition
- Commoditization of Offerings
- Selling to more sophisticated/smarter buyers
- Incorporating social into selling
- Sales structure/sellers not suited for new GTM Strategy
- Multi-generational sales force
- More committees/challenge selling to them

Improving Sales Performance

- Not Enough New Opportunities
- Low Up-sell and Cross-Sell
- Poor Forecast Accuracy
- Low Sales Rep Productivity
- Slow ramp time/high failure for new sellers
- Poor territory coverage/penetration
- Lack of a common sales language
- Lack of Adoption of prior training
- Poor or insufficient manager coaching
- Lack of Trusted Advisor relationships
- Improve seller/customer/partner retention
- Inconsistent sales messaging
- Challenge articulating business value
- Challenge selling to the C-Suite
- Poor opportunity qualification
- Losing to “Do Nothing”

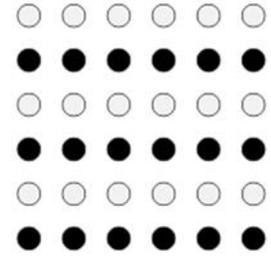


Where there are similarities and differences

Industries

There are really no blue oceans² in the sales effectiveness industry, just gradations of red. Many industries are saturated with sales effectiveness training, consulting, assessment, and technology firms ... often because they have historically spent a lot of money on sales effectiveness, typically have high turnover, relatively sophisticated sellers, more complex sales, and in some cases many alumni of the industry that moved into sales effectiveness. For example:

- Technology
- Telecommunications
- Business & Professional Services



There are other industries that some firms avoid, sometimes because of specialized knowledge required to speak with credibility with executives; sometimes because the sales forces are smaller; and sometimes because their IP isn't a perfect fit for sellers in the industry.

- Aerospace & Defense
- Automotive
- Banking, Financial Services, Insurance
- Consumer Products
- Education
- Health Care, Life Sciences, Pharmaceutical
- Hospitality
- Industrial, Manufacturing, Chemicals, Oil & Gas
- Media
- Practitioner Sellers (Acctg, Legal, Architecture)
- Private Equity, Venture Capital
- Public Sector
- Retail
- Wholesale & Distribution

Geographies, Size & Channels

Two firms going after the same industry may still not compete though, because few firms say they will work with anyone. Typically, they will have a sweet spot (ideal customer) and no fly zones for customers above and below certain sizes. Some firms effectively restrict their potential markets based on the cost of their offerings.

In addition, in industries with multiple sales channels (ex. inside, field, indirect), many firms will restrict their pursuit to a subset of channels. There are also numerous niche providers (ex. Inside Sales Trainers, Indirect Channels Consultants).

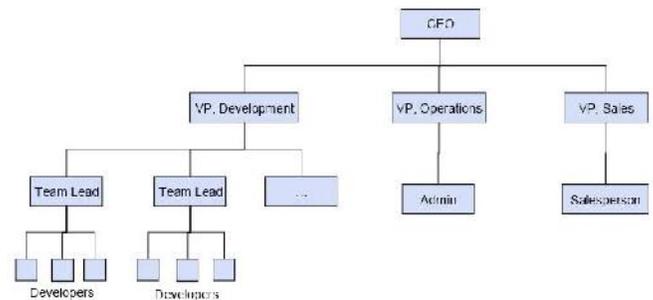
Geography is another area of separation as few firms truly deliver globally. In fact, many smaller firms will try to focus most of their efforts on just a portion of the US (or other country) to lower their own cost of sale.

² The [Blue Ocean Strategy](#) book is a great read if you haven't already

Audience

By default, all sales effectiveness firms sell to one common functional area – Sales. However, a potential area of differentiation is how far, if at all, the firm expands to other buying audiences.

This ranges from the simple “all customer-facing” employees that picks up teams in marketing (BDR, SDR) and services (professional services, customer success) to other variations touching multiple departments at varying depths.



Sometimes the target audience is dictated by the background of the team – everyone is an ex VP Sales? Well they might just avoid HR and marketing. Sales is from Mars, Marketing is from Venus, and HR is from somewhere out by Neptune.

Implementation Approach

Another area where firms often sound similar is in how they implement their solution. There are only so many ways to implement any project, and only so many synonyms to use. Here are some common terms:

1. Project Discovery/Kickoff/Definition/Assessment/Preparation/Baseline/Set Up for Success
2. Design/Build
3. Curriculum Development/Integration/Tailoring
4. Training/Deployment/Launch/Installation/Ignition
5. Reinforcement/Sustainment/Measurement/Transformation/Driving Adoption/Institutionalizing
Change/Internalization/Coaching/Activation/Embed

As an example, here was the 3D-S model I made 10 years ago which would work with minor changes for about 50 different firms!



Where people (hopefully) sound different

What They Sell

Most firms have some sort of “big animal picture”³ to describe their special snowflake approach to sales effectiveness. Sometimes they are positioned as levers or areas to improve sales effectiveness and sound relatively all-encompassing at first glance. Others are variations on similar themes. One common theme is essentially:

- Create Demand / Identify Opportunities
- Manage Opportunities / Win Deals
- Manage Customer Relationships / Grow Accounts
- Manage People / Performance
- Manage Processes /Execution



However, even within similar themes there should be differences in how the firms describe their solutions or “how we do it.”

One major point of differentiation is where they fall in the Off the Shelf-Customized continuum. On one end of the spectrum you have large packaged training firms with multiple methodologies available in multiple languages, and often with accompanying books and hefty per person licensing fees. All that lends itself to the “hammer and nail” sales approach and trying to convince clients that they need consistency more than they need perfect fit to their company.

At the other end of the spectrum are firms focused on creating a custom solution for every single client. Even within this model the firms will re-use IP from past projects, though it may not be well packaged for that use. These firms are often smaller (single shingles, two guys and their trick duck) or consultancies that don’t really see themselves as trainers.

In the middle are a wide range of firms, from those that started on either end but have morphed to something closer to the middle.

Comparing what two firms sell is often complicated by the fact they will have overlapping content, though often with entirely different points of view on how to address the topic. For example, “Talent Management” might mean using assessments for hiring to one firm, and how managers coach and develop to another.

Even the word “Consulting” means entirely different things to firms. Often this is because of where the firm’s founders come from. An ex Accenture management consultant might be thinking about “go to market sales strategy development”, while a former high tech VP Sales who started a training firm might be thinking about “deal coaching” – but both will have a bucket called Consulting in their Services list.

³ Here is my [2009 post on Big Animal Pictures](#)

How They Say They Are Different

There is something of a Bermuda's Triangle for differentiators – somewhere between Crazy Founders Syndrome, Founders Myopia, and the Plague of Sameness you will find many differentiators go to die.

Here are some examples of differentiators used by sales training and consulting firms. How many do you use today?

- Deep customization
- Off the shelf & ready to go
- Industry specialization
- Extensive curriculum
- We know one thing – Focused curriculum
- Experienced and expert facilitators
- Results in initiating and sustaining change through the organization
- Our process
- Our founders are still running the firm
- Your best + Our best = The Best²
- Client-tested experience
- Change Management Approach
- A track record of delivering increased sales
- Innovators and Thought Leaders
- Proprietary Research and Data
- Unique Consultant Talent
- We get to know your business inside and out
- We can demonstrate ROI
- We do it all
- We pick up where other companies leave off
- Multi-modal training delivery
- Our Executives Experience at the C-Suite Level
- Our "Learn by Doing" Approach
- Highly Rated Coaches and Training
- Easy-To-Use Tools
- Global Expertise – done business in 99 countries
- We do strategy through execution
- Tool and technology agnostic
- Proprietary tools and technology
- Our pricing approach
- Our train the trainer model
- We have great Partners
- Our team has 5,000 years combined experience⁴
- We wrote a book!

Not all of these are horrible, but many require a long conversation to explain how they do things better and differently regarding a specific point of differentiation.

Amazingly, many firms don't even list their differentiators on their website – though this saves them from their prospects noticing that their differentiators are the same as the other firms they are considering.

Coda: Sales Technology Firms

While the focus above has been on firms that do sales training and consulting, the challenge for buyers is that others in the sales effectiveness spectrum use similar terms to describe what they do. For example:

- Clearslide, a tech firm focuses on 3 areas: Sales Rep Productivity, Content Effectiveness, and Forecast Accuracy
- Brainshark says they help “on-board new hires faster” and “enable managers to increase productivity”
- Salesforce.com helps you “close deals faster,” “grow pipeline fast,” and “help sales reps sell faster than ever”



⁴ Probably 500 consultants who are in their early 30s, but 500x10 = 5,000 so they aren't lying!

You're No Different: Now what?

So you've embraced the fact that you have been touched by the Plague of Sameness. What might you do? Below are some simple thoughts as you start brainstorming this with your leadership team. You should also check out thoughts from Hinge⁵, experts in Professional Services marketing. Brand Taxi⁶ also posted ideas around differentiation in Professional Services.

Walk Your Talk

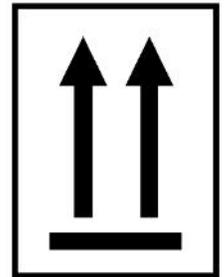
As I mentioned in a blog in 2008⁷, many sales effectiveness firms don't use their own IP very well. An easy way to differentiate will not be "what you sell" but "how you sell."

And of course, if your IP includes content like Sales Messaging or Sales Strategy Consulting, use it better than your best customer does!

Align Sales & Marketing Messages

When talking to sales effectiveness firms and listening to their clients there are a few key areas that jump out to me as needing to be in alignment – but that often are anything but. They are:

1. Website
2. Content Marketing
3. Sales Collateral and Presentations
4. Sales Conversations
5. Email Marketing



Many websites don't include the answer to the question "Why Us?" – i.e. a reference to the firm's differentiators. At the very least the top 5 talking points used by sellers should be here. The content probably already exists in printed form in the Pitch Deck or Capabilities Presentation.

For simple ideas of what else typical firms discuss on their website see my "[Generic Sales Effectiveness Site](#)."⁸

Other content that should be aligned are the answers to your target audience (functional areas, industries, geographies, size) as well as what you do, how you deliver it, and where you've done it before.

Focus on Testimonials

Many firms talk about the 3 simple questions you must address with clients – Why Change? Why Now? Why Us?

I like the 4th question added by the RAIN Group – Why Trust?⁹ To answer that question your buyers want to see, hear, and talk to as many testimonials, references, and proof points as possible. Capture them and then put them on your website and on the tips of your seller's tongues.

⁵ [Find Your Differentiator: 21 Ways to Gain a Competitive Advantage for Your Firm](#), Hinge Blog, 10/3/16

⁶ [Differentiation: The Key Challenge For Professional Service Firms](#), By John Grace And Tony Tiernan

⁷ [Walking your talk, drinking your Kool-Aid®, and making sure the cobblers kids have shoes](#), Strategy 2 Revenue Blog, 7/26/2008

⁸ Inspired by Winger's song, [Generica](#)

⁹ [4 Questions Sellers Must Ask to Build a Value Proposition](#), RAIN Group blog, 10/7/2015

Competitive Analysis

To be clear I am not suggesting you “focus on your competition,” but far too many sales effectiveness firms believe that all they need to do is “focus on the customer” and that it’s OK to “ignore the competition.”

Founders Myopia is often behind this thought process. It doesn’t always hurt the firm because many firms get the large majority of their business from past customers and referrals – so the deals are essentially non-competitive, or sole sourced.

In the current buying environment where typical buyers know more about your competition than your sellers, you are asking for trouble if you don’t keep up with what others are doing. If nothing else, it’s hard to convincingly talk about how you are different when you don’t understand what you are comparing yourself against.

So, use competitive analysis to help 1) your sellers understand what to sell, 2) your marketers understand what to market, and 3) your product developers understand how to tweak your product portfolio to be different.

While I don’t work all any of these firms to know how close their website-speak is to reality, here are a few sites to review for ideas of how to hit some of the topics above:

- Why Us: [Richardson](#)
- Problems We Solve and Buying Audiences: [SPI](#) (Sales Performance International)
- What We Do, How We Do It, and Industries We Serve: [SPI](#)
- Client Successes: [RAIN Group](#), [SPI](#)

For an example of how NOT to present yourself to prospects who don’t already know you, check out the [Miller Heiman Group](#) website. The menu focus on Product areas without reference to customer pains, problems or outcomes. If someone scrolls down the main page they can see there are lots of options to address “Sell More,” though it is unlikely they can figure out what they need and how products work together until they navigate through a maze of pages.

Side note: The Miller Heiman Group website is a good example of the challenge firms have in growing through acquisition, and buying firms because the “multiple was good” and not because they were a perfect fit to the strategy.

Talk To Me

If you would like some additional thoughts on how your firm might address the Plague of Sameness please reach out to me at tcm@strategy2revenue.com, or +1.678.467.9316.

