

What Customers Really Want: Understanding Buyer Behaviour

Without a detailed understanding of buyer behaviour and the purchasing process, marketing strategies are based on incomplete and often misleading data, according to Rea-TMA Marketing, in [Understanding Buyer Behaviour](#).

The challenge in an [Understanding Buyer Behaviour](#) programme is to generate the critical information on buying behaviour directly from customers as the essential foundation for building more successful sales and marketing programmes.

Analysis of the sales and marketing process – i.e. the continuum of activity across the customer funnel, from market planning through to the sales close and retention activity - is essential to identify and quantify the leakage points. But the key questions then are: why are the leaks occurring, and what do you need to do differently at each stage of the funnel in order to improve results?

To find the answers requires qualitative research of the buyer's behaviour and the purchasing process: the critical stages, the issues and the personnel involved during each customer's 'journey', from having no need or knowledge of your solutions, to selecting and purchasing from your company.

The core problem is this: the buying process is opaque and knowledge of what customers *really* want is incomplete. What is required is an understanding of the dynamics by which purchasing decisions are made in the target market. This then raises some important questions you must ask about your customers' buying process:-

Questions	Reasons/ Action
Are there any key stages that can usefully be identified and aggregated in the buying process?	To understand how sales enquiries develop and progress in the sector – and then influence them
What are these stages and their duration?	To align appropriate sales & marketing activities with each stage
Who are the decision-makers and influencers, and what are their interests?	To know who to target, when and how
What are the major issues for the customer at each stage of the buying process?	To then address the issues in your service proposition and communications
How do buyers arrive at decisions?	To understand how you can influence and persuade them

But can't this information be acquired from the sales team and revenue data? After all, the ultimate goal is increased sales: so aren't sales statistics the best measure of what the market wants?

The answer is "probably not". Firstly because historic sales information alone is unsatisfactory, and often misleading for this purpose. Sales statistics report only on the results of sales and marketing activities which the company actually employs, of course - but competitors might be using other methods to better effect. And you cannot gain insight historically based on what you did not do.

Secondly, feedback from the sales team is usually partial and incomplete, as contact is often with a limited range of individuals in the customer organisation, and at only specific stages in the sales and marketing process or funnel, such as once a sales enquiry is flagged. The attention of salespeople is mostly driven by the short term necessity of securing a sale – because that's the immediate business imperative for sales folk - rather than understanding what initiates and directs the buying process, as well as the implications for your total sales and marketing strategy.

As an example, the requirement for enterprise software by a customer's IT project team may derive from a high-level business decision, perhaps at Board level and initiated by the CFO or COO, and driven by a range of strategic and operational issues and priorities initiated from beyond the IT department.

Through detailed questioning to uncover and better understand exactly where and how buying decisions arise, this then enables you to develop a sales and marketing programme that addresses the buyer's process. This might include marketing communications specifically targeting the CFO, with a strong ROI proposition and case studies from the relevant industry peer group, perhaps delivered through financial publications or forums.

Clearly, there is a major challenge in addressing this often incomplete understanding of the buying process. It also raises another question for you: if you gather and collate this customer data on buyer behaviour successfully, how can it be used by your company? What changes would you need to make to your sales and marketing organisation to really benefit from this insight into customers?

An effective solution is to find out what customers really want through qualitative research of the market, by telephone interview. The strategy is to ask a representative sample of customers in a prime segment – such as B2B key accounts – questions to elicit the process by which they make a decision to buy.

This enables you then to meet customers' identified 'wants and needs' for information, service and solution delivery, through a sales and marketing process that matches these customer requirements precisely.

Most buyers have a systematic 'buying process' to purchase offerings like yours - as they move from having no knowledge that they have a problem; through to recognising a need; identifying and assessing a range of solutions and options; and then choosing a supplier from which to purchase.

The process they follow might be unconscious and habitual, or it might comprise specific, formal procedures that the organisation follows. Usually it is a combination of both.

Qualitative research will identify the specific buying process for each type of offering and customer organisation. The objective then is to determine the key stages and the core issues at each stage, such as:

- The decision-makers and influencers
- The formal and informal procedures for assessing and dealing with vendors
- The decision criteria for moving on to the next stage in the process

Qualitative research is specified, rather than quantitative because the task is to uncover often unconscious buyer motivation and behaviour. This requires 'open-ended' questioning so that, rather than providing a "yes" or "no" answer, the customer is required to think about and talk through his/ her decision-making rationale and processes.

Quantitative research, alternatively, imposes the vendor researcher's own 'agenda' in this instance, usually through the provision of 'yes/ no' response or

multiple-choice answers. This methodology is certainly beneficial for later second-stage research – to validate and quantify key buying parameters – but inappropriate for uncovering the often complex information on buying behaviour in which you're primarily interested here.

Each project is undertaken as anonymous research by telephone interview of an agreed sample customer population, based upon a questionnaire that is designed to meet precise information needs, employing specialised questioning techniques to reveal buyer motivation and behaviour.

Equipped with this information, a sequential buying process can be specified and validated. This can then be mapped to your sales and marketing funnel: so that at each stage in the process your sales and marketing is aligned to provide exactly what the customer requires in order to buy from you, and as soon as possible.

The stages in the sales process will then range progressively from making the buyer aware that you exist, to generating sales leads, securing sales meetings, beating the competition, selling the specific solution and winning repeat orders - profitably.

This methodology, and the answers gleaned will enable you to develop a more transparent sales and marketing process, one which can be optimised by internal agreement, so that sales and marketing teams are aligned within a common, validated process for targeting the market and developing new business. It will also enable you to redefine the key metrics at each stage in the funnel, and then to address any further problems or resource issues at each stage.

For further details: [Understanding Buyer Behaviour](#)

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