

Sales is not a poorer cousin of marketing

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Whenever I hear a conversation around career tracks in the life sciences, the topics that seem to gravitate around research, product development, quality, computational biology or chemistry among others. Such discussions seem to lean towards technology and associated technical aspects, as well as the intellectual halo that surrounds such streams. I also hear statements being made around how our country must invest a lot more into R&D and also nurture a scientific mindset in our students through our much maligned education system. Echoes of these themes are often the centerpieces of presentations and debates in career fairs, biotechnology expositions and student-counseling events.

While I certainly concur with the above thought tracks, a concern that gnaws the corners of my mind is around the almost forgotten discipline of sales in this industry. Selling, often mistakenly perceived as the poorer cousin of marketing, may well turn out to be a camouflaged career option for students in the life science domain.

To a budding life science student, who may be pursuing an undergraduate or post graduate degree in biochemistry, microbiology or biotechnology, the radar of his mind will most likely place research and other technical streams high on the agenda in terms of career options. In all probability, sales may either not figure in his list of priorities or at best will be regarded as the last resort option.

At this point, let's digress for a moment to differentiate between sales and marketing. Simplistically said, while sales focuses on the actual contact with a prospect or customer to fulfill a corresponding transaction of exchange (of goods and/or services

with financial returns), marketing relates to the build-up of all the elements to draw attention to the value offered by such goods or services provided and thereby facilitate the transaction. Our formal university education system does offer post graduate courses in pharmaceutical marketing (M Pharm or MBA).

However, the domain of life-sciences in the real-world spans more than just pharma or biotechnology industries (though these are predominant), for example, medical devices, diagnostics and instrumentation, apart from other medical, or agri-based services or products. Subtle but definite distinctions exist between these sub-domains. Such products and services offered by such industries have had their genesis through innovation at some point in time. Their value is not realized commercially until they are brought to market and reach customers who need them. This is easier said than done, of course. Here is where the sales function in such organizations plays a vital role. In a life science driven enterprise, especially for a start-up with an innovation-rich product or service can be quite an invigorating challenge to deal with.

Selling a concept or an innovation

For starters, sales personnel in life science organizations are not dealing with simple commodities. They have to be able to comprehend the underlying science behind the product or service. They have to be able to frame coherent talk-tracks highlighting the value proposition for the customer, where the features and benefits are aligned to the customer's most pressing needs. Customers, in this context, would be scientists, technical or medical professionals. A salesperson in this field needs to deploy a range of cognitive and interpersonal skills while relating them to nuances of the sales process and buying behaviors of technical or medical customers.

In essence, apart from possessing the fundamental scientific and technical knowledge of the product or service in question, an effective salesperson needs to be able to use logical reasoning and credible arguments deftly and tactfully while presenting his pitch to the customer. Prior knowledge of the customer's profile and mindset, especially about his buying behavior will be a huge advantage.

Let me illustrate my points with a hypothetical example, as follows. A sales executive, who is trying to sell a diagnostic kit to a medical professional that detects a biomarker for a debilitating or fatal disease, needs to:

- â€¢ Know the basic facts about the disease
- â€¢ Be aware of the key facts about the biomarker
- â€¢ Understand the science and technology that is used (with reference to the diagnostic kit), to detect the biomarker, as well as the protocol
- â€¢ Be knowledgeable about the addressable market and the competitive landscape around the product
- â€¢ Articulate clearly the value proposition to the customer, in the face of possible competing technologies
- â€¢ Face and respond calmly and convincingly to the customer's objections, doubts and skepticism
- â€¢ Leverage the key nuances of the selling process while simultaneously juggling scientific elements of the product along with rational persuasion techniques keeping the need, mindset and buying behavior of the customer in mind, all in real-time

Skill sets required to succeed

These are by no means simple tasks. They require tremendous intellectual prowess and mental energy from the salesperson, which are often underestimated. The point therefore, that I am trying to emphasize is that technical selling in the life-sciences offers opportunities to promote innovative concepts in novel ways that are far from boring, routine or mundane. Each sale offers the sales professional the chance to draw upon and deftly blend his reservoir of scientific and technical knowledge, business acumen, persuasive and influencing abilities to present his 'pitch'.

Behind the scenes, this calls for extensive planning, analytical and strategic thinking and the ability to 'connect a variety of dots', apart from competencies such as interpersonal sensitivity, assertiveness, verbal clarity and the 'gift of the gab'. The ultimate aim for the salesperson is to arrive at the right positioning of his sales pitch to the prospect or customer that will result in a favorable outcome.

Career growth opportunities

A high-performing salesperson can grow into the marketing domain with relatively higher confidence than someone who enters the marketing arena directly, without prior sales experience. Having experienced the rough-and-tough edges of the market first-hand is an invaluable asset that a salesperson-turned-marketing professional can rely on. Career growth in sales and marketing in the life-sciences, like other fields, revolves around factors such as increased number of products or services, expansion into new territories or geographies and may also encompass alternative channels of selling or marketing. Such growth can be plotted graphically with relative clarity, as individual performance in the sales arena is both measurable and quantifiable.

A junior sales executive has the potential to rise to the ranks of a national, regional or even a global leader in sales and marketing depending on the canvas of the organization and his own talent and performance. Another dimension that enhances their opportunities for deriving additional income is related to various motivation theories, (specifically the Expectancy theory by Victor Vroom) - sales incentives. While salespeople, like other employees earn a fixed portion of their total remuneration as salary (which is linked to efforts and is guaranteed), they also get a chance to earn variable incentives based on their performance. In essence, the higher is the sales linked to an individual's efforts, the higher is the incentive he can earn.

In my own organization, concept-selling plays a crucial role in shaping the present and the future of the business. We constantly invest our energies and resources deeply into building the sales talent pool by focused simulation-based training and on-the-job learning interventions. Our learning and development philosophy is designed around the application of the Kolb's cycle and in David Kirkpatrick's four-stage model for measuring the effectiveness of training and its impact.

Sales in life-sciences : A viable career option

In conclusion, I would like to echo the words of the famous author Robert Louise Stevenson - "everybody lives by selling something!" My appeal to aspiring life-science students is that they need not bypass sales as a viable career option. In life sciences, concept-selling plays a pivotal role in building the fortunes of the organization, where the true value of innovation is brought to the market in reality.