

Stop Talking About Your Product First



Based On A True Story

The following is based on a true story



Walt's iPhone alarm rang at 5:45am as it always did, but he was already awake. And even though he was wide awake, he wanted to stay in bed. He didn't want to go to work. Again.

There was a time when he looked forward to going to work. But he was starting to dread it. Things were not going well there. He was beginning to wish he could run away from it all. He was feeling like a colossal failure.



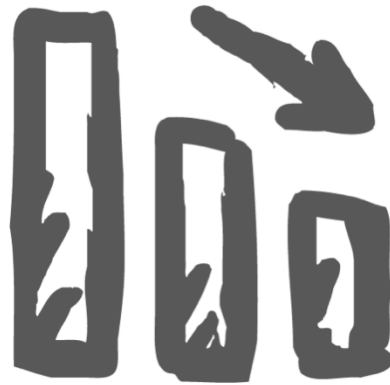
Walt is an engineer and the CEO of Briscoe Manufacturing, a family-owned company with origins in wrought iron fencing that over the generations had diversified into a wide range of steel, aluminum, bronze, glass, and stainless steel products. Walt's great grandfather started the business.

The company sells some products directly through a sales team, and others through distributors.

To drum up business as long as Walt had been with the company, they followed the traditional sales and marketing playbook including networking, buying lists, sending direct mail, cold calling, advertising, and exhibiting at trade shows.

Then, when customers were researching a purchase, one of the first things they'd do is call a Briscoe Manufacturing sales rep to get information.

And then things just seemed to change. For the worse.



A couple of years ago, sales began to slip. The customers weren't calling as much to get information from their sales reps. And when they did call, it was mainly to negotiate a lower price.

To try and shore up the flagging sales, Walt had a slick-looking new website built with lots of information about Briscoe Manufacturing, its history, its products, awards and announcements.

Everything you could want to know about Briscoe Manufacturing was on that site. Walt was really proud of that new website.

But sales continued to slide.

The first layoffs since Walt had been with the company followed.



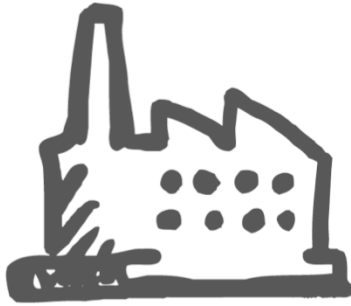
And what was even more maddening is that sales continued to slide even though, by every industry measure, the overall demand for their types of products was increasing.

One day, Walt's VP of Sales quit and took two salesmen with him to work for a competitor, Sheridan International.

Then sales really dropped off.

More people were laid off.

Walt was haunted that he was going to be the Briscoe that killed off Briscoe Manufacturing.



One day on a production line, a welding problem arose related to cold lapping in the short arc transfer process.

Walt went to Google to see if he could find some answers.

He found a detailed article that explained common gas metal arc welding problems and solutions. He discovered that one of the possible solutions to his fusion problem was changing to a flux-cored wire.

He explored that site a bit more and discovered several ebooks and a library of how-to videos that would be helpful for his welders. He downloaded an ebook about the the latest gas metal arc welding technology.

He liked that site. He started visiting it regularly to get answers to welding-related questions. He downloaded some more ebooks, a tip sheet and a buying guide.

The site belonged to Williams Welding Equipment and Supply.



One day Walt got a call from Williams Welding.

He normally didn't answer the phone because of all the irritating cold calls and robocalls. But he recognized "Williams Welding" on caller ID and answered it.

"This is Walt Briscoe," he said.

The caller said "Hi Mr. Briscoe. This is Matt Brady from Williams Welding. I got a message that you downloaded several ebooks from our website and I was wondering if you found what you were looking for, or if there's some other information we could get for you."

Walt chuckled and said, "Yeah, I was researching a welding problem that came up and found your site. You guys have a lot of helpful information on your site."

That turned into a 45 minute conversation about Walt's welding challenges. The salesman for Williams Welding was a great listener. But he also asked Walt several smart questions that really got him thinking. It was very helpful.

Walt and Matt agreed to a follow up call to more fully discuss Briscoe Manufacturing's current welding operations.



The next morning it hit him.

He realized why his sales team wasn't getting calls from customers anymore.

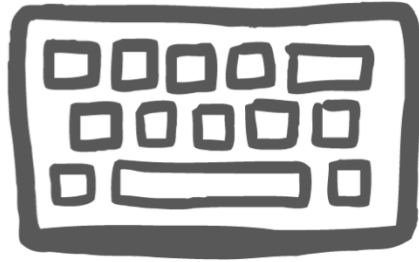
His salespeople were no longer the first place customers went for information.

Customers were getting their information online and were only contacting his salespeople after doing their own research.

He smacked his forehead. "That's how I get information now – just like I did with that welding site! Why did I not realize my customers were doing the same thing?"

He thought, "Why can't Briscoe Manufacturing answer customer questions on our site like that welding supply company?"

"Our slick new site only has information about Briscoe Manufacturing. It's all about, well... us. There's not a single bit of helpful information that a customer might be looking for help with."



Then, he started googling search terms that people who might never have heard of Briscoe Manufacturing might be using. Like, “alternatives to wrought iron fences” and “forged custom metal fabrication” and “architectural metals.”

The Briscoe Manufacturing site was nowhere to be found.

But guess who’s site was on the first page of Google for several of those search terms? Sheridan International – the company where his VP of Sales and some of his salespeople went to.

“No wonder they’re hiring more salespeople!” he thought to himself.



The next afternoon, Walt assembled his sales and customer support people and had them shout out every question they'd ever gotten from a customer.

Two of Briscoe's best distributors joined the meeting via speakerphone.

In 90 minutes they came up with 93 different questions.

In the weeks that followed, Walt and the sales team prioritized the questions and began to answer them on their website with articles, tip sheets, buying guides, and later with some simple videos.

Walt's goal for his company's website was to become a definitive source of information and answers about the problems they solve for their customers.



Later that year, website traffic started to pick up (they had never followed how much traffic their site had in the past).

Prospects started downloading helpful ebooks and signing up for their newsletter.

His sales team started following up with prospects who had visited their site. The sales team also began sharing their helpful information with their prospective customers during the sales process.

And the sales team started getting more calls and appointments.

Sales cycles began to shorten.

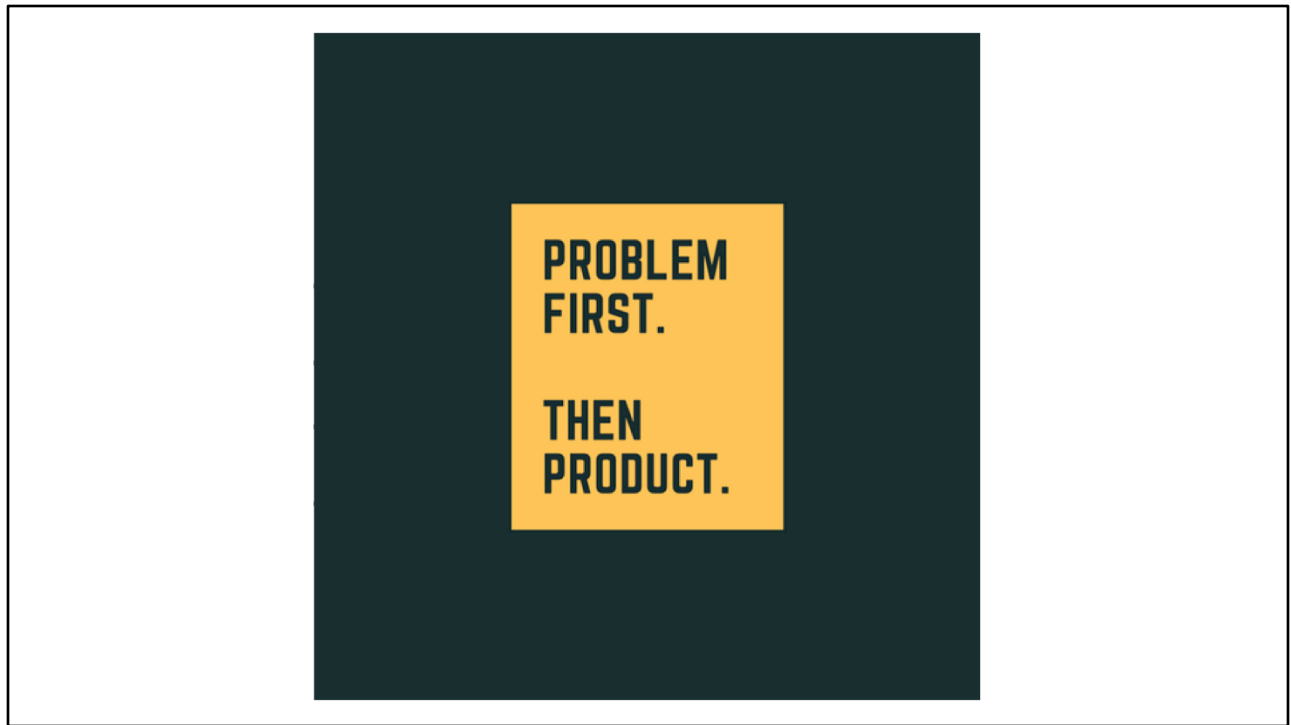
Sales picked up.

And sales to existing customers really took off.



Ultimately, Walt was able to turn around the declining sales. And he was lucky enough to hire back some former employees. His business is growing again and back in the black.

The moral of the story? In this era where customers can avoid your sales pitches and marketing messages, to sell more, you first need to be helpful.



From a marketing and sales standpoint, the proven key to success that is the most difficult thing for companies to do is to focus their communications first on helping their customers solve problems before talking about their products.

- 1. Why So Product Focused?**
- 2. Why The Product First Approach is Broken**
- 3. How to Move Problems Before Products**

So in the time remaining, let's talk about 3 things:

Why do so many companies insist on talking about their products first and foremost, and to the exclusion of most everything else?

Why that's even more of a liability now than just a few years ago.

And some of the things that you can do to help steer your company away from talking about your products before talking about your customers problems.



I have some friends who work at a manufacturing-related software firm.

For Manufacturing Day last fall (which as some of you may know is the first Friday in October) the company hosted the local meetup to celebrate Manufacturing Day. Some of my manufacturing friends were there. One of my clients attended.

Prior to the cocktail reception, there was to be a presentation about Manufacturing Day. We were expecting to hear perhaps about the state of manufacturing, how to get young people to consider a career in manufacturing, or perhaps some interesting information about the state of our local or regional manufacturing scene.

Instead, we were subjected to a 45-minute presentation on their software platform. The CEO/Founder and then the Vice President of Sales gave a detailed product demo.

I've never had to endure a timeshare sales pitch, but I can only imagine it must be like what we had to sit there and listen to. And I'll be honest with you, if there weren't cocktails and heavy hors d'oeuvres waiting for us after that presentation, I don't think we would have sat there so patiently.

My friend is the head of marketing for that company. After we'd both had a drink at the reception I asked her if that presentation was typical. She said, "You have no idea. They insist on doing webinars the same way and then complain about the low attendance."



Let's look at manufacturers as an example.

These days a LOT of manufacturers have a product problem. And by problem I don't mean that there's something wrong with their products. Most manufacturers make excellent products. In fact many of their products are over-engineered.

The problem is that the culture of the product overpowers nearly every other function. In some cases the sales function has the upper hand, but even then, the sales team is often very product focused.

Why is this?

Well, manufacturers make a product, so naturally they spend a lot of time thinking about all aspects of the product, and are appropriately and justifiably focused on that.

There's enormous pride in their product, as there should be.

There's often an unspoken belief that if the product is well-engineered, it will sell itself.

There's also a belief that without that product there wouldn't be a company.

And they are absolutely **wrong**.

Without customers there wouldn't be a company.

- 1. Internally Focused**
- 2. Competitor Focused**
- 3. Customer Focused**

There are three types of companies.

Companies that are focused primarily on **themselves**, their own products and operations.

Companies that are focused primarily on their **competitors**.

Companies that are focused primarily on their **customers**.

Which kind of company do you think Amazon is? [customer focused]



When Jeff Bezos attends an internal meeting he insists on there being at least one empty chair in the room. That empty chair represents the customer. Invariably during meetings he'll point at the chair to remind people what their primary focus should be.

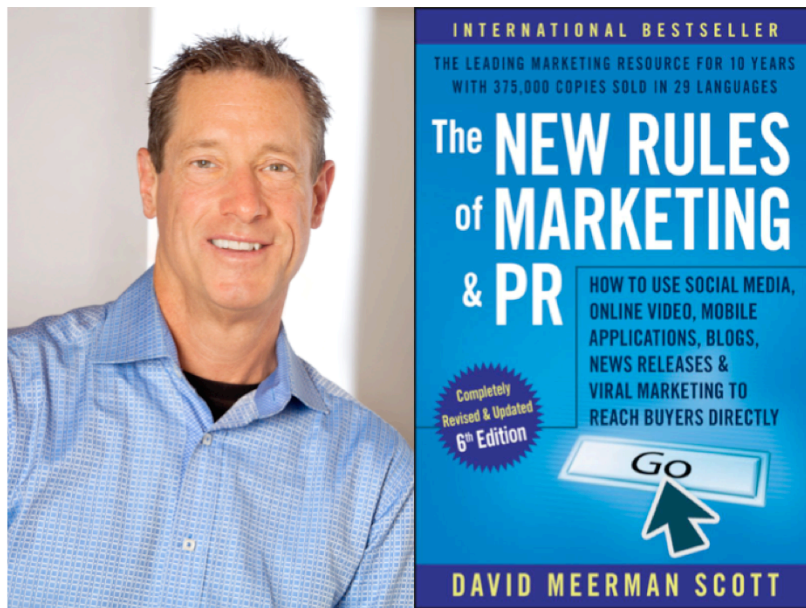
All the research points to the fact that companies who are focused on and have a deep understanding of their customers are the most successful.

And those companies also know that their customers don't wake up thinking about their product.

Your customers are much more interested in themselves and their problems than they are in your product.



Did you know that all of your customers listen to the same radio station? Do you know what station it is? **WIFM** [what's in it for me]



As David Meerman Scott, the bestselling author of “The New Rules of Marketing and PR” says ALL THE TIME,

**Nobody Cares About Your
Products (Except You).**

-David Meerman Scott

He also says...

The biggest mistake I see with marketing (and I see it all the time) is when companies focus too much on their own products and services.

-David Meerman Scott

2. Why The Product First Approach is Broken

Another reason why companies still talk about their products first is because they are in **denial** about the fundamental change that has occurred in how people buy.

When I was a kid and my dad wanted to buy a car, where was the first place he would go to get information? [the car dealership]



Why? [there was no other place to get the information]

This is what Daniel Pink in his book *To Sell is Human* refers to as “**information asymmetry**.” The buyer wanted information and the seller had it. And the seller used that information as leverage to guide (or strong arm) the buyer toward a purchase.

We are now in an era of Information Symmetry

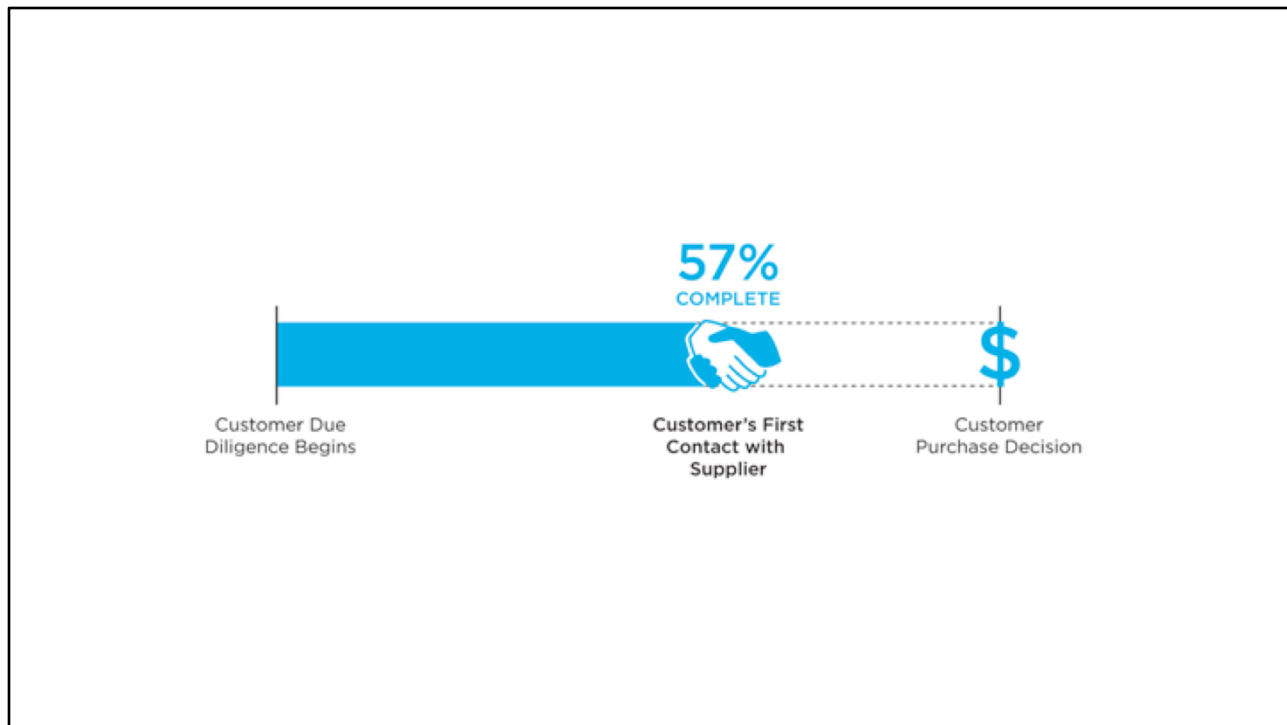


Fast forward to a couple of years ago when my wife wanted to buy a car – where was the absolute last place she went to get information?

[the car dealership]

Where do you suppose she got her information? [went online, etc.]

B2B buyers are no different.



A few years ago, CEB/Gartner determined that in a B2B buying situation, the buyer is now at minimum 57% through their purchase before they first reach out to the seller.

Forrester has put that number closer to 90%.

It varies by industry and product of course.



And to make things even more challenging, it's become increasingly difficult to reach your prospective buyers thanks to **marketing interruption avoidance technology**.

Who can give me an example of marketing interruption avoidance technology?
[Caller ID, DVRs, satellite radio, ad blocking technology, etc.]



On my Marketing Book Podcast where each week I publish an interview with the author of a new marketing or sales book...



I interviewed Tom Fishburne, also known as The Marketoologist about his book Your Ad Ignored Here: Cartoons from 15 Years of Marketing, Business, and Doodling in Meetings.

Tom Fishburne is a graduate of Harvard Business School and worked for several blue chip companies in marketing before he became a full-time cartoonist



Has anyone here seen his cartoons?



In the interview I asked him about his sources of inspiration for so many years of hilarious cartoons. His response was interesting. He said that his best source of material is making fun of **marketers and businesses who think they still have a captive audience.**

So your customers are increasingly able to avoid your interruptive marketing and sales messages and they are going online (for the most part) to get their information.

I know what you're thinking, "But Douglas, our customers are ... what? [different].

They don't use the internet to search for our products and services."

I heard there might be some engineers here, so **let's look at some numbers...**

89% of all B2B purchases start with an internet search.

-Google/Millward Brown

**84% of buyers engage in online
information consumption and education.**

-Google

By a factor of 3 to 1, B2B buyers say that gathering information online on their own is superior to interacting with a sales representative.

-Forrester

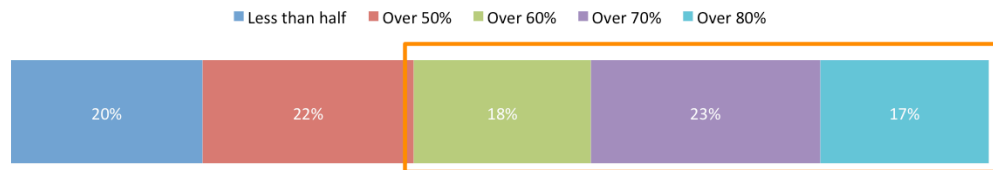
59% of B2B buyers explicitly indicate that they do not want to interact with a sales representative as their primary source of research.

-Forrester

But Douglas, **engineers are different!**

Over Half the Buying Process is Online

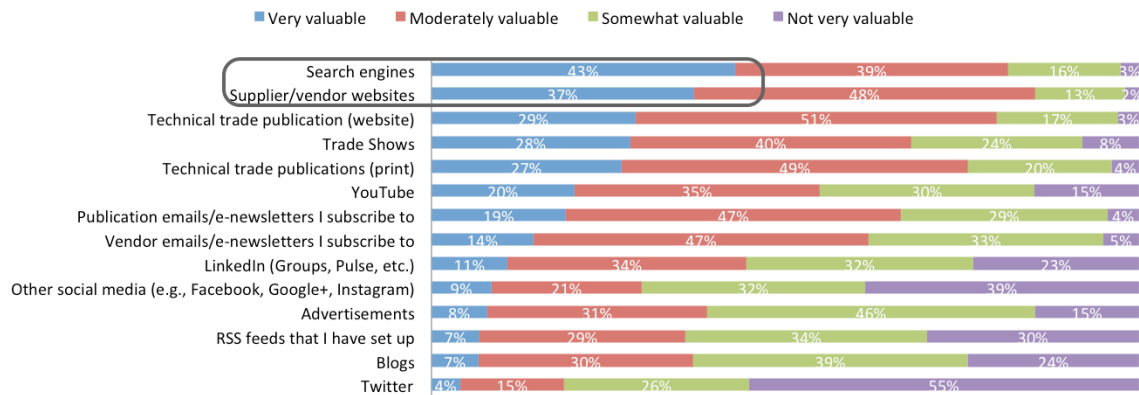
For the majority of engineers, nearly 60% of their buying process happens online before they speak to the company.



In thinking about the entire buying process for significant purchases you make for work, from early research to the final purchase decision, what percentage of the process happens online before you finally speak to someone at the company?

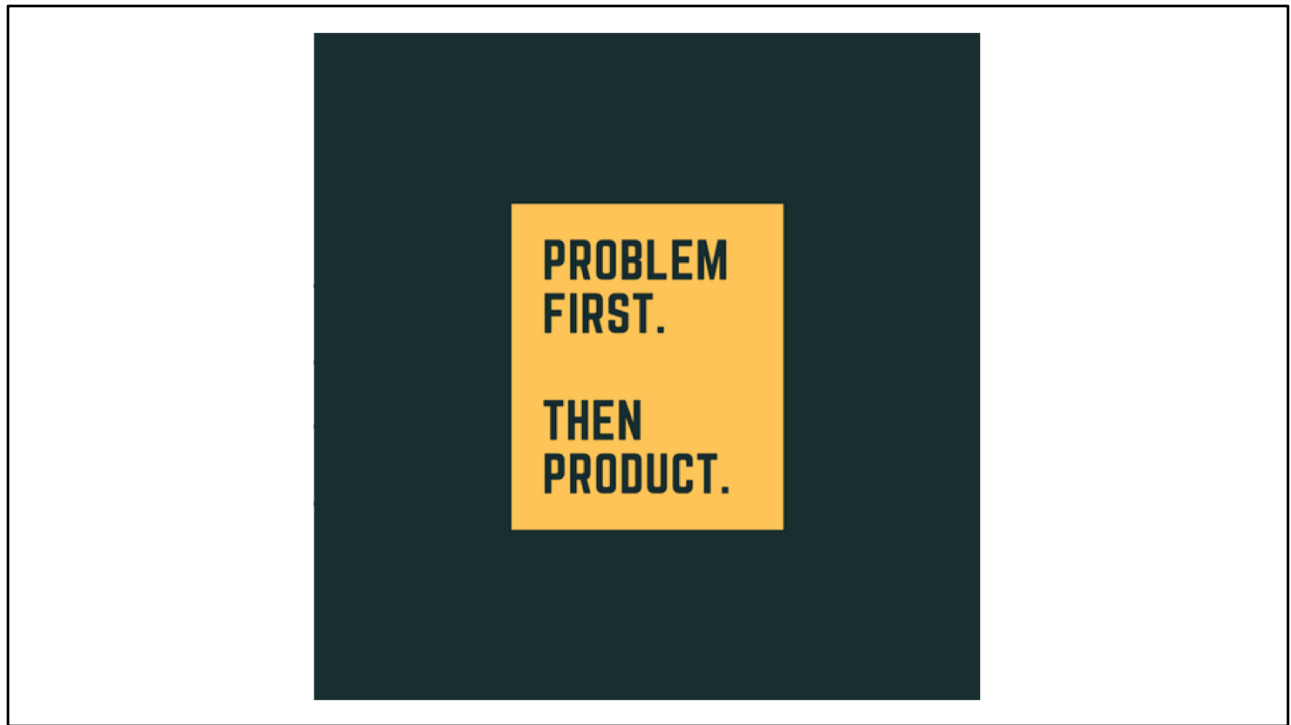
According to a 2017 study by IEEE GlobalSpec and my friends at Trew Marketing, for the majority of engineers, nearly 60% of their buying process happens online before they speak to the company.

Engineers Get the Info They Need through Search



How valuable are the following sources when seeking information on the latest engineering technologies, industry trends, and products?

And engineers get the information they need from search.



So there's a whole lotta searchin' going on, but do you think they are **looking for information about your product first?** Maybe a few.

The evidence suggests that the majority of your prospective customers are searching for **information about how to solve a problem** of some kind.

And ninety percent of the time they are trying to **avoid pain** (or loss) of some type. Ten percent of the time they are **seeking some kind of gain**.

Remember, I'm not saying you should not talk about your product.

I'm saying you should not talk about your product first – in the modern economy, those that teach and address their customer's pain earn the right to sell!

3. How to Move Problems Before Products

Finally, here are a few approaches that you can take to try and lead your organizations toward talking first about your customer's problems before talking about your products.

Educate With Questions



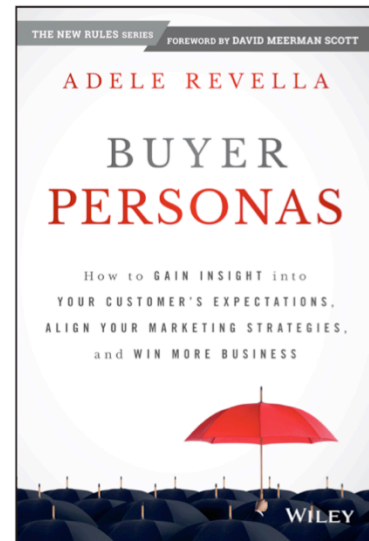
Educate with questions.

Go around the room and ask your colleagues or your CEO about a relatively recent expensive purchase they made that **concluded with a salesperson's involvement**.

It could be a purchase at work like some capital equipment, hiring a professional services company, or in their personal life like a car, a home renovation. Ask them to briefly describe the steps they took toward the purchase.

In most cases, people will talk about how they did research online long before they engaged with a buyer. Then ask if they think that your customers aren't doing the same thing.

“In the simplest terms, buyer personas are examples or archetypes of real buyers that allow marketers to craft strategies to promote products and services to the people who might buy them.”



Another approach that I’ve seen have a positive and profitable effect with clients is the concept of a buyer persona.

As defined in Adele Revella’s bestselling book *Buyer Personas: How to Gain Insight into Your Customer’s Expectations, Align Your Marketing Strategies, and Win More Business*:

In the simplest terms, buyer personas are examples or archetypes of real buyers that allow marketers to craft strategies to promote products and services to the people who might buy them.

The 5 Rings of Buying Insight



At the core of leveraging buyer personas are what the author calls “The 5 Rings of Insight.” Understand these buyer insights and you’ll have an unfair advantage over your competition.

Here’s a quick overview of The 5 Rings of Insight:

Priority Initiative: What triggers your buyer to seek a new solution?

Success Factors: What does your buyer want or need from your solution?

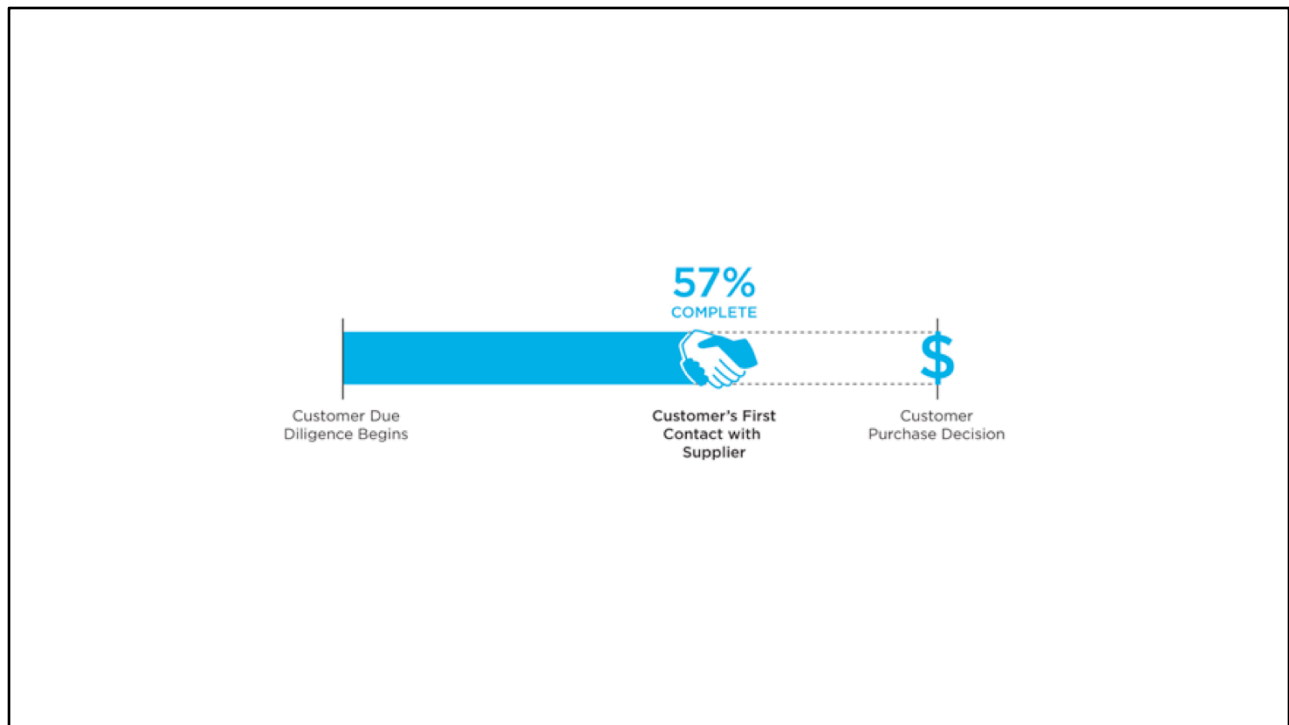
Perceived Barriers: What gives your buyer second thoughts about your solution?

Decision Criteria: What is most important to your buyer when choosing a solution?

Buyer’s Journey: How does your buyer choose a solution and who else is involved in the process?

But the bottom line is that, armed with these insights, your product development, business development, marketing and sales, and customer service will be better informed and aligned to generate more happy customers and profitable growth.

But what if you hear your head of sales or your CEO say something like “We don’t need to do that research - we already know our customers.”



What they are saying is that they know their customer on the right side of that graphic – after they're in contact with them.

Before we create content for clients we do buyer persona interviews about The 5 Rings of Insight. They only take about 20-30 minutes.

When we present the results, the clients they are amazed at how much more they know about their customers problems and challenges. All we had to do is ask.



The sad truth is that most companies know far less about their customers than they think they do.

Here's how to make that point. And I'm not saying you'll get promoted for doing this, but this was mentioned during a Marketing Book Podcast interview and one listener tried this and was promoted. And she said this is what tipped the balance.

Are you ready?

Go around the room and ask everyone there to think of their favorite character from a movie or TV show. Have them write down the name of the character on a piece of paper and then give them 5 minutes to write down everything they know about that character on one side of the paper.



Are there any fans of the TV show “The Office” here?

Let’s say they pick out a character who is enormously popular with both engineers and salespeople. Who do you think that would be?



Dwight Schrute.

What are some of the things people might write down?

[A few things people might say:]

Works at Dunder Mifflin - the paper distribution company

One of the highest-ranking salesmen

Craves authority over his co-workers

Relishes any minor task his boss will give him

Assistant (to the) regional manager

Bed-and-breakfast proprietor at Schrute Farms

Owens a beet plantation

Loves Battlestar Galactica

Owner of the business park enclosing Dunder Mifflin

Notorious for his lack of social skills and common sense

Loves martial arts, weapons and the justice system

Office rival with fellow salesman Jim Halpert

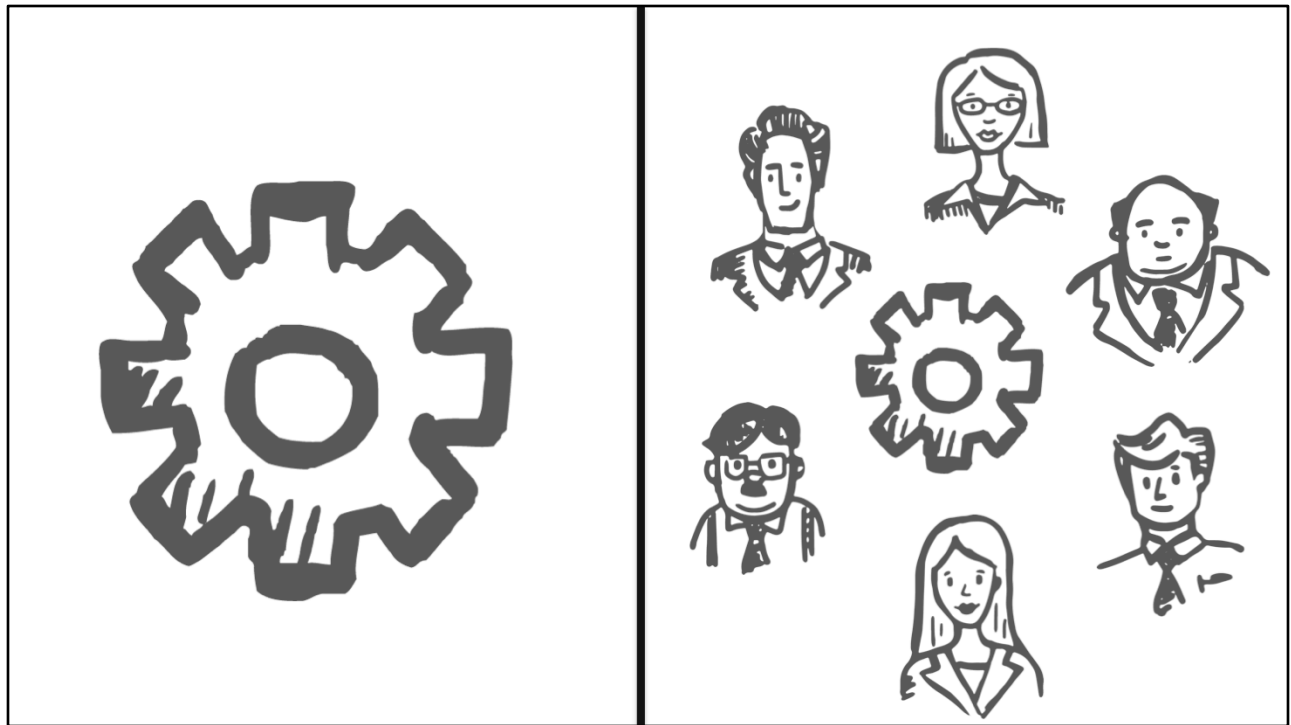
Speaks German



OK, after they've had some fun and shared everything they know about their favorite character, have them turn the paper over and ask them to write down everything they know about their ideal customer (your buyer persona).

There is often less information that they know about their customer, particularly as it relates to those 5 rings of insight which, for the most part occur before the seller has been contacted by the buyer.

But the more you understand your customer's problems, the more likely they'll be interested in hearing about how your products can help them.



One final tip in case you are completely shut down in your efforts to try and offer helpful information for your customers – as much as possible, whenever talking about your products, try to include customer stories which shows the customer as the hero rather than the product.

So for instance, instead of saying our widgets are great. Instead say something like “when Alice Adams at ABC Manufacturing was sweating about if her production line would shut down because of faulty widgets, she tested our titanium widgets, saw an increase in production up time, did a complete installation and was able to focus on quality improvements.”

In closing I’d like to share with you two thoughts.

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Send the following message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

Dear Customer:

We don't care about you.

It's all about us.

First, when all a company talks about is themselves and their products, they are telegraphing that, whether true or not, that they don't care about their customers and the success of their customers and they are more interested in themselves.

Empathy

The capacity or ability to imagine oneself in the situation of another

Second, the most the most important word in marketing and sales... is empathy.

Empathy is the capacity or ability to imagine oneself in the situation of another.

That's not the same as sympathy.

Sympathy is feeling compassion, sorrow, or pity for the hardships that another person encounters, while empathy is putting yourself in the shoes of another.

If you are able to put yourselves in the shoes of your customers, even just a little bit, you will be amazed at the positive effect it can have on your company's ability to become known, liked and trusted.