

WORDS OF SALES WISDOM



## Why Brand Matters in BtoB Selling

[By Dan Stiff]

You have a BtoB brand whether you intend to or not. Now what?

Companies that cater to the tradesman rather than the consumer don't understand what separates them from their competition in most instances. But what separates them is their brand. Brand is the important missing component in most BtoB settings, and companies need to wake up to this sales opportunity if they want to be top-performing organizations.

Unfortunately, BtoB salespeople often sell everything but the brand. They will sell on the bases of price, delivery, product quality, features, benefits, and warranty, but seldom do they speak to what the brand means to the buyer in terms of operational efficiencies, experiences, or emotional connection.

Yes, I said *emotional connection*. You see, many trade salespeople erroneously believe that it's all about the logic. We sell what we can see but neglect the intangible and emotional asset that the brand has become for many buyers within the BtoB setting. One of my customers put it well: "The brand is like the wind. You can't see it, but you can feel it, so you know that it exists and that it can be a gentle breeze or a powerful gust." For most BtoB companies, it is barely "a gentle whisper."

### The Old Way of Selling

Most BtoB salespeople have been taught to sell intuitively based on the customer's reaction to the following three things: *product* (how well it meets the buyer's standards for price, styling, and quality), *relationship* (what level of trust, past history, and integrity has been built between buyer and seller), and *performance* (how good the company's follow-through, problem solving, and customer service are).

The hard truth is products can become outdated, relationships can go awry,

performance can slip in one transaction-and, under such circumstances, the competition can duplicate you. Essentially, trade buyers traditionally compare your company to the competition around these components, making you potentially a me-too choice.

### The New Way of BtoB Selling

What is the alternative? It is bringing your brand into the selling arena, making it bulletproof. The competition can't duplicate your people and the power of your brand. BtoB salespeople are usually most removed from the idea of brand selling because their brands are not easily identifiable or visible. So how do you make a brand come alive in a BtoB setting?

First, don't abandon the tried-and-true first three steps in the buyer-seller interaction; they are still critical to an organization's properly serving its customers. Products still must meet buyers' needs and specifications for a fair price. Relationships still must be cultivated, even with long-time customers. Performance still must include strong service after the sale, perhaps more so now than ever. Without these factors, a brand is little more than pure imagery, a hollow promise.

However, you need to add a fourth step in your selling process-the brand-in order to extend the playing field, avoid cultivating a "me-too supplier image," and leverage the

power of your unique brand.

### Bringing the Brand to Life Using Brand Pillars

You can bring the brand to life by using what I call "Brand Pillars."

Brand Pillars are the key components that make up your brand. They represent strategic choices and investments the company has made over its history to provide better products or services to its key customer base.

Brand Pillars are usually aspects of the company's operations, approach to the marketplace, or a business model, yet they have a distinct customer focus. Generally, they are not birthed in the boardroom but originate on the lips of the customer. Brand Pillars have simply become so much a part of the company that they are widely seen by your BtoB customers as part of the fabric of the business.

For example, an industrial-products company's Brand Pillars may be end-user commitment, quality and value, innovation and creativity, and unmatched service. Notice that although there is very little specific description of the company's products in these pillars, buyers, especially in the business-to-business setting, make purchasing choices based on them because they represent certain priorities,

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strategies, or operating advantages that imply value. That value has to be leveraged by weaving brand language into conversations throughout the company and into salespeople's conversations with BtoB customers.

Brand Pillars are unique advantages your company has worked hard to build. They:

- are impenetrable by the competition.
- differentiate your brand.
- are valued and mentioned by customers.
- are proven over time.
- are seen as part of the fabric of your company.

In a BtoB selling situation, you can bring your brand to life and differentiate yourself from the competition by:

- taking credit for what you do well as a company.
- differentiating your brand using your Brand Pillars.
- intentionally equipping your salespeople to talk about it.
- remembering what got you here.

### **Sell the Brand *First***

Most importantly, you need to talk about your brand. This actually should be the first step, for it will differentiate you from the competition right upfront in the conversation.

Brand should be at the forefront and not buried just beneath the surface (like a quiet whisper) of all crucial conversations-both internal and external. Only then can brand deliver true differentiation and competitive advantage for the BtoB company.

### **About the Author:**

Dan Stiff is President of Leadership Performance Development, Inc. ([www.lpdinc.com](http://www.lpdinc.com)), a training and consulting company specializing in sales, leadership, and organizational development. His book, *Sell the Brand First: How to Sell Your Brand and Create Lasting Customer Loyalty*, was published by McGraw-Hill this May.