



HOFFMAN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS, INC.

TOP SIX SALES GUIDE MISTAKES

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TOP SIX SALES GUIDE MISTAKES

Gwyn Finnell (gwyn@hoffmanmarcom.com) is a senior marketing consultant for Hoffman Marketing Communications, Inc., a business and technology writing company specializing in strategic sales guides, white papers, and collateral. For more information, visit www.hoffmanmarcom.com

Most companies spend their marketing budgets generating market awareness, but precious little equipping their sales force with the knowledge to sell. And in today's economy, selling is anything but easy.

That's why developing effective sales guides is so critical. A good sales guide educates your sales force on how to position and sell your offerings to the prospects most likely to buy. It also functions as a reference tool, organizing details for just-in-time access to help sales people feel in control of the sales process. It helps to build confidence in your offering so that sales people feel comfortable presenting it to customers and confronting the competition. And a good sales guide motivates your sales force to sell.

Unfortunately, many companies publish ineffective sales guides that can ultimately cause revenue to slip. Listed below are some of the most common sales guide mistakes, and how to avoid them.

Mistake 1: Failing to involve the sales force.

Many marketing departments develop sales guides without any input from their "customers"—the sales force. The result? A document that's disconnected from their real-world challenges and only serves to widen the chasm between sales and marketing.

The fact is, to develop effective sales guides and tools, marketing needs to understand how customers buy (i.e., how a sale takes place) and how sales people sell. So take a lesson from product development and *talk* with your internal customers before you begin. Locate a willing cross-section of your sales force, and pick their brains to learn what they consider most useful—and most frustrating—in sales guides they've used in the past. These frank conversations may yield insights that will surprise you and reshape your sales guide strategy, as well as take a huge step toward bridging the gap between sales and marketing.

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Mistake 2: Providing inadequate competitive information.

Sales guides often paint a too-rosy view of the company's competitive position, or contain outdated competitive information. Look at it from the sales team's perspective—how would you like to go to war with inaccurate data on your enemy's strengths, weaknesses, and position relative to your own? Most likely, you'd feel like you were set up to lose.

So give the sales force what they need to *win*. Provide an unbiased summary of who they're up against, how your company compares, and how they can win in tough competitive situations. Be honest about an offering's weakness relative to the competition, and explain how to handle those vulnerabilities when talking to prospects. It's easy to position your product against a competitor's weaknesses—it's the competitor's strengths that pose a challenge.

Mistake 3: Failing to motivate.

Sales people feel tremendous pressure to produce. Their jobs are always on the line, so they naturally seek out the fastest, surest route to quota. The problem is, the fastest route may be what's familiar—the existing product line—rather than what's new. Your challenge, then, is to motivate the sales force to sell your new offering.

An effective sales guide “sells” sales people on the new offering by including the revenue potential of various kinds of deals (including a breakdown of solution components and percentages) and customer success stories that help build the offering's credibility to the sales rep, as well as to customers.

Mistake 4: Failing to respect the sales force's time.

Sales people are constantly bombarded with information about products, changes, upgrades, special offers, etc. The last thing they need is a lengthy, disorganized document that doesn't help them find important information when they need it.

So strive to develop a concise, easy-to-use sales guide. Be choosy about the information you include. Organize your content by thinking about the natural flow of questions a sales person would ask about a new offering. Make it easy for sales people to look up what they need quickly.

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Use charts and tables whenever possible to condense large amounts of information. And make sure that your sales guide is interesting to read.

Mistake 5: Using generic marketing messages.

Generic messaging blurs the differences between your offerings and those of your competitors', resulting in a deep-seated confusion that sales people may convey to your customers. And, generic messages cripple the sales force's ability to position your offering for different industries and audiences.

Sales people need a concise product definition, a unique value proposition, and a succinct elevator pitch, developed with consensus from product management, sales, marketing, engineering, and communications. If appropriate, tailor the messaging for different buyer profiles. Otherwise, the sales force may struggle to communicate the offering's competitive advantages.

Mistake 6: Choosing the wrong writer.

Sales people often complain that sales guides contain too little information to be useful, or too much technical detail to bother reading. Why do so many sales guides fall so short of the target?

Most often, it's the biases and background of the writers. When written by marketing staff, sales guides may shy away from technical detail. When written by technical staff, messaging information may be ignored. Neither group may understand the sales process. And, the specialized writing and organizational skills that sales guides require are not typically a job requirement for sales, marketing, or technical personnel.

Good sales guide writers can translate technical information into simple, accessible prose, but they're familiar with the sales process and have a marketing bent. They're expert project managers capable of managing multiple drafts, hundreds of comments, and countless details. And, they're skilled in quickly identifying the most important elements in massive amounts of information, and synthesizing them into tight, clear writing.

If none of your employees have this combination of skills, or if the ideal candidate doesn't have the bandwidth to complete the project quickly,

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you may wish to consider hiring an experienced sales guide developer. While contractors may not have historical knowledge of your company's offerings, they offer several tangible benefits, including organizational and writing skills, as well as full-time dedication to the project. And, outsiders can sometimes be more effective than employees because they have no turf to protect: they're only interested in getting the job done well.

Will avoiding these sales guide mistakes always increase the corporate bottom line? Of course not. Other factors, such as the type of product being sold, the economic and competitive climate, etc. all affect whether an offering fails or succeeds. But making these mistakes can certainly *decrease* the bottom line by alienating the sales force and sabotaging an offering's potential for success.

Hoffman Marketing Communications, Inc. provides strategic writing services to global high-tech, consulting, and energy companies. Now in our 18th year of operations, we specialize in developing sales guides, white papers, and other strategic marketing collateral. Hoffman writers offer a unique combination of technical savvy, marketing skills, and writing talent to translate the most complex technologies into accessible prose that bolsters your sales and marketing efforts. Satisfied clients include Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, Cisco, Hewlett-Packard, and Symantec. For more information, visit www.hoffmanmarcom.com



HOFFMAN

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

Strategic business and technology writing

322 Digital Drive

Morgan Hill, CA 95037

P: 408-778-5664 f: 408-778-5663

Info@hoffmanmarcom.com

www.hoffmanmarcom.com