



B2B Storytelling for a Virtual Age that Wins Customers and Deals

by [Nancy Pekala](#)

While we're all fully entrenched in the virtual age, more than half of sales and marketing professionals feel unprepared to deliver compelling virtual conversations. This is one insight culled from the [Q1 2012 State of Marketing and Sales Messaging Survey](#) which indicates that a different kind of sales training is needed within B2B organizations.

In an exclusive interview with [B2B Marketing](#), Tim Riesterer, Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer of [Corporate Visions, Inc.](#), and author of "[Customer Message Management](#)" and "[Conversations That Win the Complex Sale](#)," shares insights on how B2B organizations can improve sales-ready messages and tools that salespeople can use to create a compelling story that wins more deals. Following is an excerpt from the interview.

B2B Marketing: *In the sales messaging survey you conducted recently, you found that a full half of sales professionals surveyed indicated they have insufficient, little or no training and are not equipped with the messaging and tools necessary to deliver effective virtual conversations. What impact is this having on B2B organizations?*

Tim Riesterer: Sales people in B2B environments are conducting more and more of their activities virtually, over the phone and over the web. In fact, 60-70 percent of their interactions with prospects and customers are virtual instead of face-to-face. Our research revealed that nearly 60% of sales professionals don't feel well-equipped and don't have the right tools to sell in those environments. The sales function is really different over the phone and via the web than it is face-to-face. The impact on B2B organizations is that their sales teams are spending more time in a selling environment they feel inadequately prepared to deal with.

B2B Marketing: *Specifically, what types of training are most needed today for B2B sales professionals?*

Riesterer: The sales person has got to be able to provide good information and great presentations in a virtual environment, and they're just different. When you're engaging prospects in person there's a lot of movement and you can create a lot of engagement just by who you are and the presence that you create. There are a lot of people who're trained sales people who have great in-room presence, but there is little training involving how to engage prospects when they can't see you, just staring at a screen and how to keep them from multi-tasking while trying to engage them.

As a result, the sales professional's messages and tools must change. For example, instead of using PowerPoint presentations with slides that change every 2-5 minutes, the slides should

build dynamically. Every statement and main point a sales person makes should be reflected on the screen. The slide should change every 15-30 seconds in order to keep the customer focused on the screen. You need to change the dynamics of the presentation in order imitate the activity that would appear if you were in the same room together.

Likewise, over the phone, we're looking at ways to train salespeople to ask the person on the other end of the line to grab a pad of paper, put a pen in their hand, and ask them to sketch or write things out so you can create engagement. So, the prospect may be writing down certain numbers and equations or drawing certain pictures with bubbles or boxes so they're engaged in the conversation, and that requires a new message to actually develop that kind of storyline. You need to build these kinds of 'message objects' into presentations which requires a specific type of sales training.

B2B Marketing: *How should training that addresses the sales function in virtual environments differ from that of non-virtual environments?*

Riesterer: In the B2B organization there's typically a sales training or sales operations department which is charged with getting salespeople skilled to perform better. In addition, marketing departments typically provide training on specific messaging as it relates to new products and services. So what has to happen in organizations is that the skillsets you're training your salespeople on, for the environment they're selling in, actually has to match with the content that's being created to equip salespeople to have that conversation. If the content being created is the same traditional PowerPoint decks that don't work in virtual environments, while you're training salespeople to perform better in virtual environments, you're going to have a misfire. You have to be working both sides, helping train the message creators to build more virtually sensitive content and train your salespeople to work better in that environment and bring those together as sort of a systematic look at how to have impact in that environment.

The other thing to consider is that most virtual conversations are in the early stage of a sale cycle. If you really qualify for the later stage of a sale cycle, that's when you're willing to put the resources into a face-to-face meeting. The early stage of the sales cycle requires a different kind of conversation. In the early stage you're trying to convince somebody they should actually do something different and create a deal, so your deal creation messaging and skills are often different than deal closing messaging and skills. You have to have a plan that encompasses both, deal creation on the virtual side and traditional deal closing on the later stages.

B2B Marketing: *What are the primary reasons B2B organizations are not equipping their sales force with the training, tools and message needed?*

Riesterer: One reason is that organizations don't think of the sales function today in terms of different environments with different needs. I think they believe, "Well the web, you use PowerPoint, so we build a PowerPoint deck. Over the phone you might need some sort of a call script and some sort of a questionnaire and we've built that." They haven't thought about really what's needed to make those tools more engaging in those environments. They just build them and figure that a good sales representative will figure out how to use them. B2B organizations really haven't stepped back and thought about the experience from the customer prospect side and whether that stuff will work.

A second reason is that organizations think of content they're creating in terms of the written word. Since most B2B content is being created in the form of PowerPoints or white papers, it is not being translated to the spoken word which is required in virtual environments. Being able to

say something with conviction and confidence that sounds right to the listener is much different than a message that's produced for a written format. The lack of sensitivity of how messages are conveyed via the spoken word is just another gap in the content creation side that needs to be considered.

B2B Marketing: *What kind of messaging and content is needed to effectively arm sales professionals with the tools they need to perform their function within the virtual conversation environment?*

Riesterer: Those individuals responsible for creating sales tools need to work directly with sales professionals to provide content that meets the needs of specific environments. You need to pre-build the tools. For example, if you want to make presentations look like the sales representative is sketching things, use handwriting fonts and other illustrative techniques. Create PowerPoint presentations that include micro-builds and allow the sales representative to simply click to tell the story. The scripting should include clicks and the advancements that are clearly identified. In that way, sales representatives know the right messages will come at the right time; the activity is will be engaging and they can feel confident they can focus on the sales message instead of the technology.

B2B Marketing: *Is the lack of training consistent, in your opinion, across all segments of the sales professional segment, regardless of their level of experience?*

Riesterer: It seems to be. We've found that companies that have dedicated inside sales organizations seem to have done more to hone the skills of sales professionals in virtual and phone environments. Those companies that have inside sales activities seem to have at least an understanding that the need is a little bit different for the web or phone. They've invested in training for conducting effective phone conversations with a focus on engaging customers in that environment. However, since they've made the leap to the web, what's really fallen apart is the kind of visual presentation a company uses the spoken word for, such as in web conferences. That's where the proliferation is, where the emerging activity is and where I think the biggest failure point is.

B2B Marketing: *What findings from your research surprised you regarding B2B sales and marketing training?*

Riesterer: Many times, within B2B organizations, the development of messaging and tools and the training of sales teams are activities which occur in silos. When trying to perform effectively in non-traditional environments, all these elements are affected by different parts of the organization. The challenge that these companies are facing is a great conversation in one moment in time is potentially affected by three influencers to create that great conversation. That leaves a lot of room for error and failure. Companies have to figure out how to bring those three elements together—messages, tools and skills—if they're really going to crack the code.

[Nancy Pekala](#) is the AMA's Senior Director of Online Content and Editor of [B2B Marketing](#). Continue the conversation on sales strategy in the B2B Marketing Group in [AMACONnect](#), the AMA's online community exclusively for marketing professionals. Follow us on Twitter [@marketing_power](#).