

How to Build Sales with Educational Media

IMPACT TECHNICAL PUBLICATIONS

Education is a critical part of many sales processes, including those for software, hardware, and telecommunications products and services. While brochures and other marketing collateral play an important role in the sales process, educational media can convince skeptical prospects that products and services deliver the value advertised in the marketing collateral.

Educational media are materials and techniques whose primary purpose is to educate. Typical educational media include:

- White papers
- Technical overviews
- Electronic learning (e-learning)
- Help systems
- User guides

The value of white papers in the sales process is well recognized, but the value of other educational media is often ignored. Consider these examples.

- A prospective customer for a network security product makes a purchase decision after reading a technical overview that explains the technologies used to protect networks from attack.
- A prospective customer for a business productivity software product makes a purchase decision after examining a demonstration version of the product and reviewing the e-learning tutorials, which show how easy business productivity tasks are to learn.
- A prospective customer for a software development kit makes a purchase decision after testing a demonstration version of the product and its help system, which highlights the product's strengths.

- A prospective customer for a consumer electronics product makes a purchase decision after downloading the product's user guide from the vendor's website and finding answers to questions about the product's capabilities.

Companies usually design educational media to meet customer training and education goals. Good educational media often help achieve sales goals too. But – not surprisingly – educational media designed to meet goals in sales as well as in training and education make a bigger contribution to the sales process. In some situations, educational media may be designed primarily to achieve sales goals. Training and education may be secondary goals.

To show how educational media help build sales, this article examines:

1. Typical goals in a simple sales process. Educational media can help achieve goals for selling to prospective customers and current customers.
2. How companies can identify opportunities for educational media to achieve sales goals within their own sales processes.
3. How to develop educational media that build sales.

Goals in the Sales Process

To close deals, salespeople must establish value in the minds of all stakeholders at just the right points in the sales process.¹

The sales process resembles a funnel with prospective customers at the top and current customers at the bottom. The figure below shows a simple sales funnel with eight steps. The process begins with the initial prospect contact and ends with the cus-

tomers using the product. Each step involves goals for selling to prospects, customers, or both. Many different sales processes exist. For example, selling customer resource management software and selling laser printers involve two different processes.²

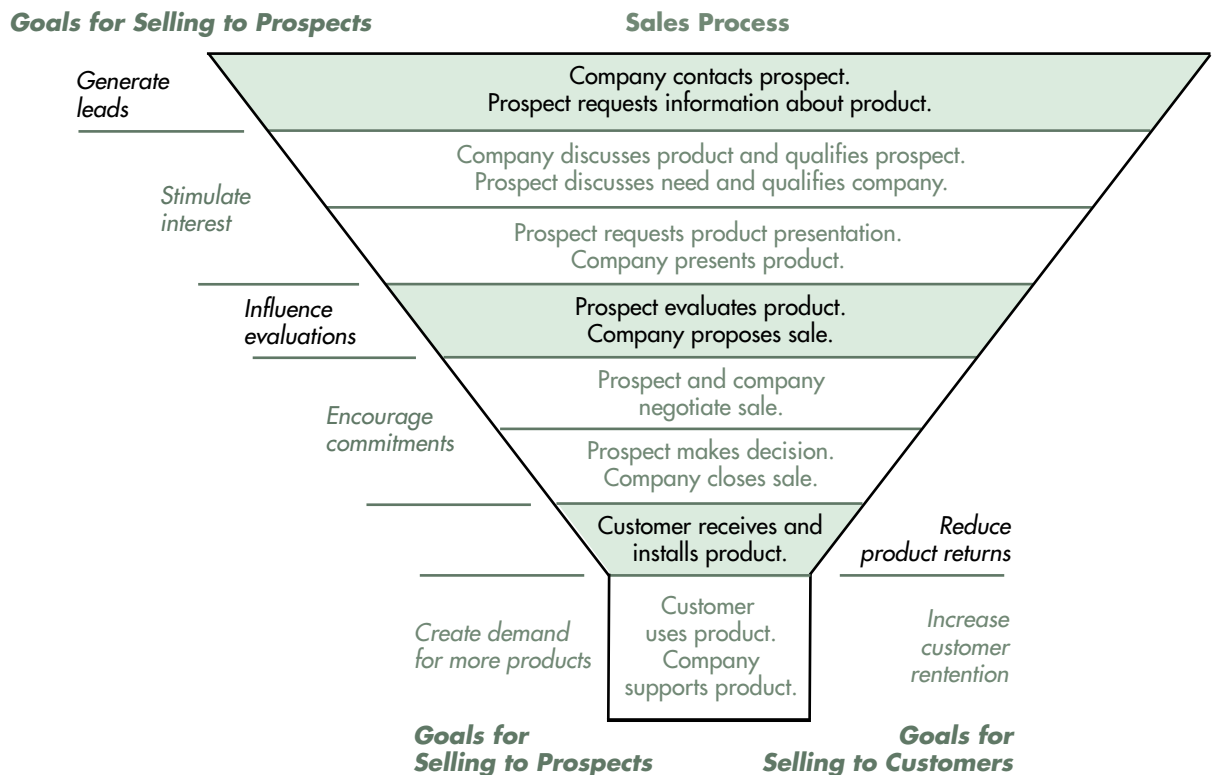
Regardless of the individual steps in the sales process, two fundamental goals are to:

- Increase the sales volume
- Reduce the cost of the process

Educational media can help achieve either goal.

1 Robert W. Bly, *White Paper Marketing Handbook*, page 52 (Thomson; Mason, Ohio; 2006).

2 Michael J. Webb discusses sales processes in *Sales and Marketing the Six Sigma Way* (Kaplan, Chicago, 2006).



Funnel diagram of a sales process showing five goals for selling to prospects and two goals for selling to customers

Increase the Sales Volume

To increase the sales volume, a company must increase either the number of qualified prospects or the rate at which it converts qualified prospects to customers. Increasing the conversion rate involves eliminating leaks in the sales funnel – obstacles that prevent prospects from moving down the funnel and making a purchase.

The sales process shown on page 2 has seven goals that help increase the sales volume.

Five goals involve selling to prospective customers:

- Generate leads
- Stimulate interest
- Influence evaluations
- Encourage commitments
- Create demand for more products

Two goals involve selling to current customers:

- Reduce product returns
- Increase customer retention

Reduce the Cost of the Sales Process

To reduce the cost of the sales process, a company must either reduce resource-intensive contacts with prospects or move those contacts down the funnel to a smaller group of better qualified prospects.

Educating prospects about high-tech products and services is often labor-intensive. Replacing time spent by highly paid sales representatives and senior members of the development staff with educational media cuts the cost of prospect education. For example, a hypothetical company sells a complicated product made possible by several new technologies. The company's prospective customers know little about the technologies. The prospects will not believe the company's claims for the product until they understand the technologies upon which the product has been built.

- The company's sales and technical personnel spend two hours educating each prospect. On average, there are 10 prospects per week. The average cost per hour, including salary and overhead, of sales and technical personnel is \$80. The total annual cost of educating prospects is \$83,200.³
- If educational media can reduce the time that the company's sales and technical personnel spend with each prospect from two hours to 30 minutes, the company will save \$62,400 per year of sales and technical personnel time.
- If the cost to develop the educational media is \$12,000, the company will save over \$50,000 in one year.

To quantify potential savings, identify your sales-process needs and estimate both the cost of the current process and the cost of developing educational media to improve the process. The savings may be dramatic!

Goals for Selling to Prospects

People don't buy what they don't understand.⁴

Educational media can help achieve the five goals for selling to prospects shown in the sales-process figure on page 2.

Generate Leads

Educational media designed to generate leads improve lead quality, quantity, or both. White papers are often the educational media of choice for generating leads. White papers capture the interest of

³ \$83,200 = 2 hours x 10 prospects x \$80 per hour x 52 weeks.

⁴ Sales wisdom, widely quoted on the World Wide Web.

prospective customers and encourage them to ask for more information about products and services.⁵ Other educational media also generate leads. For example, an entertaining and informative e-learning product demonstration on a company's website quickly turns casual visitors into prospects.

Stimulate Interest

Educational media stimulate interest in products and services by supporting the initial discussions between sales representatives and prospects. Stimulating interest helps ensure that prospects do not drop out of the sales process. White papers and e-learning continue to play an important role. For example, they may explain a product's value proposition, architecture, compliance with industry standards, and so on. When educational media explain information that all prospects need to know, company representatives can focus on prospects' special needs and concerns.

Influence Evaluations

Educational media have tremendous potential to influence product evaluations. A technical overview can show how a product's design and architecture make it a good long-term investment with many advantages over competing products. When prospects evaluate demonstration versions of products, e-learning tutorials and help systems can reinforce important selling points as they explain how to use the products. A tutorial that shows how easy a product is to learn puts competing products with less effective tutorials at a disadvantage. Good user guides demonstrate the capabilities of consumer electronics and hardware products. Poor user guides make product capabilities hard to find and difficult or impossible to evaluate when found.

5 Impact Technical Publications' free *White Paper Writing Guide* explains how to write educational white papers that achieve marketing and sales goals. To download the guide, go to: www.ImpactOnTheNet.com/wp-guide.html

Encourage Commitments

Particularly in sales of complex products and services in a business-to-business environment, buyers need huge amounts of information to make a purchase decision. Price often represents a relatively small part of the decision, with the major issues being uses and applications, compatibility with current systems, upstream and downstream effects, and support for maintenance.⁶

Educational media that show business value, explain product capabilities, answer prospects' questions, and dispel their doubts as they move down the sales funnel play an important role in purchase decisions. Detailed case studies with extensive data showing benefits and return on investment dispel doubts about cost effectiveness, while e-learning tutorials, help systems, and user guides convince prospects that the costs to learn products and services will not cancel out the savings from using them. When prospects reach the end of the sales funnel, they should feel confident that the product or service will meet their needs. Well-designed, user-friendly educational media instill confidence!

Create Demand for More Products

Customers are excellent prospects for additional products. White papers that market additional products to customers build on knowledge those customers have acquired from the products they have purchased. A help system or user guide – when designed to achieve sales goals – can show the benefits of associated products. For example, a help system can link to educational media that stimulate interest in an associated product. The help system itself can contain information about an associated product, as long as customers do not feel that the current product is missing essential capabilities.

6 Webb, Michael J., *Sales and Marketing the Six Sigma Way*, page 14 (Kaplan, Chicago, 2006).

Goals for Selling to Customers

Users of technology products, from cell-phones to e-commerce websites, often stop learning and adopting features at a level well below the full capabilities of the product.... In these cases, where adoption curves flatten out at sub-optimized levels, companies miss out on revenue from additional fees or sales.⁷

Educational media can help achieve the two goals for selling to customers shown in the sales-process figure on page 2.

Reduce Product Returns

Many technical products are returned not because they are defective but because customers can't set them up correctly or use them efficiently. Educational media (installation guides, quick start guides, task-based software "wizards," job aids, e-learning tutorials, help systems, and user guides) that clearly and simply explain how to set up and use products eliminate many product return problems.

Increase Customer Retention

Customers who take maximum advantage of a product's capabilities are more likely to purchase upgrades and additional units and less likely to switch to a competing product. Companies that sell SaaS (software as a service) products benefit greatly when customers learn advanced functions that increase their usage and fees. High-quality educational media help customers learn products quickly, use them effectively, and take advantage of advanced functions. Sales goals for increasing customer retention include educational media that make possible fast training, efficient product use, and easy exploration of a product's full range of capabilities.

⁷ Hughes, Michael, "Progressive User Adoption," *Intercom*, July/August 2009, pages 19-20.

Opportunities to Build Sales

Here are three ways to identify opportunities to build sales with educational media.

Reduce the Cost of the Process

Examine the steps in the sales process. Look for labor-intensive tasks where educational media can reduce the amount of time that highly paid sales and technical personnel spend educating prospects.

Improve the Conversion Rate

Look for leaks in the sales process. Are too many prospects dropping out at certain steps? Would prospects be more likely to continue through the process if they knew more about the product at the point where they drop out? Prospects who are not ready to make a purchase decision may be eager to learn more about the product.

Improve Sales by Providing Value

Look for opportunities to help prospects solve their problems and to show the value of your products and services. For example, a white paper that helps users optimize security on their personal computers may increase the sales of a company's security products. A user guide that shows how to set up a sophisticated telephony system may increase both overall sales of a company's telephony products and high-margin sales of premium products with sophisticated features. When designed to meet sales goals, educational media provide help and show value far better than marketing collateral.

A Competitive Edge

If your competitors rely entirely on marketing collateral to support the sales process, they are missing opportunities to solve their prospective customers' problems and to show the value of their products. If you use both marketing collateral and educational media, your competitors will be at a disadvantage!

Developing Educational Media for Sales

The first and most important step in the process of developing educational media that achieve sales goals is assessing needs.

Assess Needs

A *needs assessment* defines goals, audience, and strategies to achieve goals. The needs assessment is critical: it drives all decisions throughout the project. What goals do you want to accomplish? What audience must you reach to accomplish those goals? Describe the members of your audience in detail.

Don't start with the medium. Your goals drive the selection of the medium (or media – you don't have to choose just one) through which you achieve your goals. Starting with the medium – for example, a help system – makes the medium more important than the goals and eliminates any strategy that extends beyond the medium – for example, a task-based software “wizard” or a set of job aids.

After you have identified your goals and defined your audience, the next step is to develop strategies to achieve your goals with your audience. Identify problems that make achieving goals difficult. Look for strategies that solve the problems. For example, if prospects may not believe that your product has enough value to justify the purchase price, develop strategies that make the product's value clear.

For more information about assessing needs, go to: www.ImpactOnTheNet.com/assess.html

Develop the Project

There are many different ways to develop educational media. Regardless of the process you use, remember that the needs assessment (goals, audience, and strategies) should drive all the decisions you make throughout the project.

Here are two free sources of information about project development:

- For white papers and technical overviews, download the 88-page *White Paper Writing Guide*. It contains many useful tips; some of them apply to all kinds of educational media (not just white papers): www.ImpactOnTheNet.com/wp-guide.html
- For help systems, user guides, e-learning, and so on, download the four-page article that describes the process Impact Technical Publications uses: www.ImpactOnTheNet.com/method.html

Viewing Educational Media as Opportunities

Many companies view educational media as expenses to be reduced whenever possible – not as opportunities to build sales and to make processes in other areas such as training and support more efficient. To counter the “expense” mentality, follow the suggestions in this article for assessing needs. If you don't understand why defining goals before choosing media is important, work with a consultant who specializes in goal-driven educational media. Once you achieve your goals with one project, you will look for more opportunities to achieve goals with educational media!

About Impact Technical Publications

Impact Technical Publications, founded in 1990, is a technical and marketing communication consulting company that helps clients create the knowledge they need to develop, market, install, and support technical products and services.

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