

Address what customers care about, George Stenitzer advises vendors. But operators are pressed for time, so vendors get few opportunities to educate them in person

Strategic content marketing educates customers and opens their wallets



George Stenitzer: You get only a seven-second sound bite to make a point. The same holds true for elevator pitches, headlines and email subject lines

The scarcest commodity today is your customers' attention. Customers make their first critical decision in seven seconds: whether to listen, start a conversation or shut you down.

For vendors, these seven seconds mark the first moment of truth. You have seven seconds to gain customers' attention and answer their key question, "What's in it for me?"

In news media, your spokesperson gets only a seven-second sound bite to make a point. The same holds true for elevator pitches, headlines and email subject lines.

Address what customers care about most. Unpack the benefits they will receive through these questions:

- Which problems will your solution fix, today and tomorrow?
- How much more revenue can customers generate?
- How much capital and operating expense can be saved?
- How will this improve users' quality of experience?
- How hard or easy is the solution to implement?
- What's the proof?

Clutter

Brevity is key. Customers get thousands of messages daily from others and from you. Very few messages break through this incredible clutter.

For decades, the buying ritual between telecoms vendors and operator customers stayed much the same. Operators would recognise needs, then take time to discuss them with vendors, each of which presented competing approaches and claims.

That buying process has been upended. Operators are pressed for time, so vendors get few precious opportunities to educate them in person. Meetings are harder to schedule. Only a handful of operator decision-makers attend trade shows, and their calendars fill with pre-scheduled meetings well before the show opens.

Now, the rules of engagement are changing. So vendors must be strategic about how they appear in the online marketplace. How can you deliver your marketing message more effectively?

The buying process is now two-thirds online, one-third sales. About 67% of the buying process takes place digitally, says Sirius Decisions.

Rather than spend time with sales, operators research solutions online and consult peers. They glean content from many websites — including trade media, standards bodies, analysts, vendors and social media.

Useful content

In this hunt, genuinely useful content wins. Customers decide which content makes the most sense

and delivers the greatest value, which leads them to specific vendors.

Most vendors employ content marketing, but few do so strategically. While 88% of UK marketers use content marketing, only 42% have a documented content strategy, says a Content Marketing Institute survey.

To win at content marketing, you need a well-defined content strategy, a consistent message, and a team that develops and deploys content in a timely way. Strategic content provides ready answers to customers' problems, questions and pain points — as identified by sales. All vendor content needs to align around one key message that's delivered consistently through marketing and sales.

First help, then sell. Good content starts with customers' key questions and your solution's relevant benefits. Vendors may offer content through websites, email newsletters, magazines, news releases, blogs, white papers, videos, social media and more. To deploy content strategically, analyse the buying process and offer what customers need during each step.

Operators usually buy through large teams. A buying decision-maker drives the process, overseen by executives and supported by buying influencers in affected departments such as technology, operations, procurement and finance. Provide the content that each member of the team needs for each of the four steps in the buying journey.

1. During pre-sales, customers analyse the problem

First, operators recognise a problem and calculate how serious it is. They decide whether there's a compelling need to change, or whether to stick with the status quo.

Vendors have their biggest opportunity to stand out during pre-sales. At this point, vendors can shape and challenge buyers' thinking about the problem. They can identify additional requirements and plant key questions in the minds of the buying team.

Armed with the right marketing messages, sales can educate operators on why the status quo is not acceptable, in light of current technology, user and industry trends. Sales also can provide customers insight into the approaches that other operators are taking.

New research about business-to-business technology buyers by Eccolo Media sheds light on what content is needed at each step in the buying journey. Content preferences vary by operator size, and the findings below reflect what large companies prefer.

During pre-sales, decision-makers exhibit a preference for blogs (used by 37%) over infographics (27%), videos (26%) and white papers (26%). Regularly published blogs can generate thousands of

followers, translating into one-quarter or more of a vendor's website traffic.

The information habits of buying influencers differ from those of buying decision-makers. During pre-sales, they also prefer blogs (33%), but they place a greater emphasis on white papers (31%), and less on infographics (22%) and case studies (20%).

When customers click on a white paper, they expect to find thought leadership to address a specific problem, including an objective comparison of alternative approaches. They reject thinly veiled advertising.

2. During initial sales, customers analyse options

Having discovered many options, customers now consider which solution performs better, which is cheaper and who provides better service. For vendors, the job is to differentiate credibly from competitors' offerings.

Real differentiation calls for more than copycat products and flashy brand names. Truly differentiated solutions offer a new architecture, a novel combination of capabilities, or disruptive new technology.

"If you have lightning in a bottle, we want to know it," observes one operator veteran. Still, the onus is on vendors to get their message through.

In this step, decision-makers consult blogs (30%), videos (30%), white papers (30%) and case studies (29%). Buying influencers prefer a mix of videos (47%), case studies (42%), blogs (36%) and infographics (36%).

3. During mid-sales, customers resolve concerns and reduce risks

Customers seek third-party support via site visits, testimonials and peers. Vendors can best bolster their credibility through third parties — including reference customers, trade media and industry analysts.

In this step, decision-makers gravitate to case studies (32%), followed by detailed technology guides (30%), white papers (28%) and videos (27%). Influencers seek detailed technology guides first (36%), followed by infographics (31%), white papers (27%) and case studies (27%).

4. Finally, customers choose a vendor or two

Operators generally prefer multiple sources for network equipment. But they may choose a single vendor if one has a clearly superior solution or if they are in a hurry.

In this step, operators finalise vendor selections, negotiate terms and sign contracts. Content marketing needs to reinforce buying decisions with infographics (22%) and detailed technology guides (22%). Buying influencers back away during this stage; only a few seek detailed technology guides (18%) or blogs, infographics and case studies (tied at 11%).

No jargon

State benefits clearly, without jargon. Express benefits in a way that each member of the buying team cares about. For example, the exact same solution may deliver different benefits to each department:

- CTO: gain ease of integration with future network changes.
- Operations: simplify processes through automation, so fewer technicians need to be dispatched.

- Marketing: increase quality of experience for users and reduce customer churn.

- Finance: improve profitability with lower capital or operating expense.

As you educate customers, take pains to avoid jargon that means different things in different departments. Use language that's well understood in all the departments that have some say in the purchase.

For example, during internal meetings at one mobile operator, marketing objected to operations' plans to add "carriers" to its cell sites. To network operations, adding a carrier meant adding radio capacity at a cell site. To marketing, adding a carrier meant allowing a competitor to use the cell site.

The two departments talked past each other for weeks, until they figured out that the real problem was just jargon, misunderstood on both sides.

Within the global telecoms industry, most customers speak English today. But many customers know English only as a second language. To maximise their understanding, it's crucial to address customers with simplified global English.

Keep words, sentences and paragraphs short, so more customers can absorb your message. Choose easy words such as those in the 1,500-word Voice of America vocabulary.

Insights

Challenge customer thinking with commercial insights. Challenger marketing supports your best sales people, who work in the challenger style — proven to be the most successful selling style in good times and bad.

Customers hunger for content that educates them about trends in technology, users and the industry over the next three to five years. This kind of thought-provoking content challenges customers' thinking, and it's often the most read content on a vendor website.

That's why strategic content marketing goes beyond immediate problems and products to tackle longer-term trends and issues. Buyers especially value vendors who can bring forward unique commercial insights.

While thought leadership demonstrates your knowledge about a topic, commercial insight describes unique, compelling content that customers don't want to miss since they have so much at stake.

Generating genuine commercial insight takes some investment. For example, vendor-commissioned studies by industry analysts have proven highly effective in cutting through the marketing clutter. One industry analyst study commissioned by a vendor still generates calls to the vendor from top operators, years after its release.

What unique commercial insight can you bring forward to customers? In simpler times, vendor salespeople could drive the customer's buying process. But as buying behaviours change, vendors need to become much more strategic about content marketing.

Through strategic content marketing, vendors can address customers' questions and problems, highlight the benefits and differentiation of their solution, and offer commercial insights for the future. Content marketing built around a solid strategy leads vendors to more customers, sales and revenue. ■

After working for operators, George Stenitzer was until recently vice president of communications at Tellabs but he has now founded Crystal Clear Communications <http://crystalclearcomms.com>