

St Paul as sales strategist: an essay commemorating the years of St Paul, 2008/2009

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Business strategists know that there is no royal road to asking the right questions about their own business. But there is a detour to the ideas that otherwise may never occur to them: strategy metaphors combine disciplines that at first glance have no relevance for an individual company, but inspire questions that could be valuable for it. And so the detour becomes a shortcut.

The apostle Paul and the use of sales strategies is such a metaphor. From the middle of 2008 to 2009, Christians around the world are observing the year of St Paul, who was born in the year 8 AD in the Greek city of Tarsus.

But St Paul as a sales strategist? Isn't that a little farfetched? Whenever I mention this at client events, especially to bank sales managers, the first reaction is puzzled looks. What does the one have to do with the other? I usually say that both St Paul and banks sold or still sell abstract "products" – things that are not tangible in the material sense and whose benefits are not evident directly after purchase – in contrast to impulse buys like a pair of shoes. It is then at the latest that my audiences begin to look less puzzled than intrigued.

So let's trace the footsteps of St Paul the sales expert and consider the success factors that every strategist needs to make people enthusiastic about a product or an idea. St Paul may have been unique in regard to the power of his vision, his support from God, and his prophetic statements, but the sales strategies he used – his "key performance indicators" – are still around today.

Global presence

We who are many are one body (First letter of Paul to the Corinthians, 10:17).

It is the year 43 AD. A figure of average size, slightly bowed, trudges through the desert wind. The saddlebags of his mule contain parchment and writing materials, as well as leather, grommets, and clasps – the tools of a saddler and tent maker. In the distance, the silhouette of the Phoenician harbour in Sidon is discernible. This is where the man will embark, travelling first to Myra, then to Rhodes, Crete, and Malta, and finally to Rome, where the ship will get lost in a storm. In the endlessness of the desert, the wanderer seems small and insignificant. However, in his eyes burns a fire as strong as a thousand desert suns, and in his heart blazes the vision that spurs him on: to transform a small, fragmented community of believers into one of the world's largest religions, and to fulfil the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth (Isaiah 11:12).

With this vision, St Paul Christianised the Roman world, and along with Jesus of Nazareth, became one of Christianity's pivotal figures. St Peter, the Rock on which Jesus would build his church, is often seen as the founder of Christianity. But actually, it is St Paul who deserves most of the credit for the Christianisation of the Roman Empire. When the Messiah failed to

appear immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection, early Christianity experienced its first real crisis. St Paul was the one who turned a scattered, shaken community into a globally functioning organisation. He defined the Church's overall strategy and at the same time ensured that it remained flexible enough to survive in a constantly changing environment. He did this with an iron will, effective communication, and unconstrained mobility.

St Paul was not among the first Christians. He came from a Jewish family, enjoyed the rights of Roman citizenship, and began his career as Saul, a fanatic persecutor of Christians for the Jewish authorities. In Damascus, he fell from a horse and had a vision of the Lord. After three days of blindness, he was converted (Acts 9:3 ff.).

Like so many other Christians of his day, St Paul ultimately fell victim to the persecution of Christians under Emperor Nero in Rome. However, his strategy still bears fruit today. He took the first huge steps towards transforming Christianity into what is now one of the world's oldest, biggest, and most successful enterprises.

Networking

Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously (Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, 9:6).

Anyone who wants to achieve or sell something in a certain area has to go to where the real decision makers are. St Paul knew this. He knew where the relevant hubs of the day were, and who the multipliers were whose help he needed. Athens, Rome, and Damascus were the economic and intellectual centres of his time. Jerusalem was the place where the Temple of Solomon stood, and where Jesus was sentenced to death. Just as today's renowned scientists have to have been to Harvard and Oxford, and bankers have to have been to London and New York, St Paul had to go to where the action was. At a time with no television or newspapers, he used every available channel of communication to spread the word, whether in synagogues, marketplaces, and the temples of Athens, or along popular trade routes. His message combined richness and reach two thousand years before Web 2.0.

Wherever there is action and crowds, there is potential for conflict. The Jews in Damascus found St Paul's statements about the Messiah to be blasphemous and plotted to kill him – a fate he escaped only by fleeing secretly with the help of his disciples. Speaking one's mind loudly and clearly always carries the risk of irritating someone. But acting strategically means not allowing yourself to be discouraged by setbacks. It means sticking to your long-term goals rather than responding to every change in the weather with a tactical sidestep.

Of course, the larger the network of multipliers, the more numerous the possibilities for reaching the goal. St Paul was no stranger to portfolio management. He knew that a global organisation would be much more influential and stable than a community of believers limited to a certain region. "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation," Jesus exhorts his followers in the Gospel of Mark (16:15). St Paul not only managed to visit all the major centres of antiquity and make himself heard there, but he also succeeded in convincing the locals of the truth of his vision, and was able to persuade them to open their own "branches" – the first Christian communities in Corinth, Philippi, Rome, and Galatia. St Paul's use of this multi-level marketing made him not only the founder of global Christianity, but also the inventor of an – ethical – snowball system.

Customer segmentation

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn (First letter of Paul to the Romans, 12:15).

One question that confronts every sales organisation is whether it should focus on gaining new customers or try to make more of the ones it already has. St Paul chose the new customer approach – but again, not without opposition. At a council of the apostles in Jerusalem, he was able to persuade the others of the advantages of preaching to Gentiles (Acts 15:7). While most of the apostles insisted that only Jews could become Christians, Paul ultimately prevailed: Anyone willing to be baptised could become a Christian.

Now, it is usually not enough just to show customers your product. If you want them to understand you and take you seriously, you also need to speak their language and understand

their customs. St Paul's approach to his "new customers" was flawless. Code shifting is the linguistic term that describes what people do when they adapt their own speech to the linguistic customs of their interlocutors. "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven," as it is written in Ecclesiastes (3:1): Every audience needs a customised message individually tailored to its needs. St Paul was a master of segmentation. He knew how to approach the diverse tribes of Palestine and the residents of densely populated cities like Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem. As Paul knew, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:22)... He knew that his message was universal, but that it needed to be tailored to each individual target group. He spoke the language of the Gentiles, and he listened and convincingly responded to their worries, fears, hopes, and expectations. With empathy and active listening, he discovered what really moved people, enabling him to tap demand that could be addressed with the Good News of the Gospel.

Keep it simple

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Paul's letter to the Galatians, 3:28).

The best customers – the ones you most want to reach – are also the ones your competitors want to reach. Often, you have to convey the advantages of your product in a very short amount of time – a so-called elevator speech. It has to be brief and concise, and still able to excite. Paul knew that an overly complex product or a convoluted message could not be successfully sold to the masses. In the banking business, when an overeager advisor's explanation of a product is so complicated that the customer does not understand anything, they say he killed the customer. Paul reduced the complexity and repetitions characteristic of the Old Testament and Judaism. He removed many laws in the Torah from Christian doctrine, such as those regarding circumcision, diet, and complicated instructions for rituals and building temples. He put belief squarely in the foreground, making it the most important criterion for membership. By focusing on easy implementation and the inclusion of all ethnic groups, he created not only a sense of community among Christians, but also formulated a discount strategy applicable to the masses. St Paul went everywhere, always left multipliers behind, and brought his ideas across no matter where he was. With global reach, expanded target groups, and the radical simplification of his offer, he built up a global network of believers open to everyone, everywhere.

Here, too, of course, Paul had to deal with stumbling blocks along the way. When he preached in the temple in Jerusalem that all baptised Christians, whether they be Jews, Greeks, or other, are equal before the Lord, he was accused of blasphemy and the defilement of holy places (Acts 21:28-31). Here, again, he showed his integrity: rather than fleeing the wrath of the Jews, he confronted his accusers and spoke openly to the people (Acts 22:1-21). The fact that he was not very successful this time, that the scribes continued to demand his death, and that he was finally brought before the Roman consul, might be seen as a minor setback among the many he was dealt. But as numerous as the setbacks were, he kept his sights set on his ultimate goal and held fast to his strategy. He was not looking for "quick wins," but for long-term, sustainable success. He knew that there is something greater – later ...

Time-based competition

You want to sell your customers a product now, not in ten years. People who want quick solutions cannot be slow and cumbersome themselves. What can be done in a simple way can usually also be done fast. St Paul was in a rush, too – and he stepped on the gas. Only ten to 15 years after the crucifixion, he had succeeded in bringing the good news to almost every part of the Roman Empire. Since he fervently believed in the coming of the Antichrist soon after Jesus' death and resurrection, haste was the order of the day. Anyone who did not want to end up in hell had to be baptised – quickly, and with little ado. The roots of sayings like time is money, or the limited-time offers of banks ("Get a better deal on your mortgage – only until 31 December!") can be found in the early Christian organisation.

And above all: integrity

Whatever ideas sales strategists might have for approaching their current or future customers, there are two things, especially before the background of the current crisis, which they should never forget: patience and integrity. Many ideas become effective only in the long term, and especially in sales, long-term customer retention means sustained, long-term earnings over and above quick wins.

Integrity is just as important. No one believes that a turncoat sales manager who seeks only to please really takes clients seriously. Credibility comes from 100 per cent, authentic identification with the product being sold. It may be opportunistic to sell customers a poor product of which oneself is not convinced, but moral it is not.

St Paul was what is today called a “power seller” – a man whose mission was to bring his message to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible. But he was anything but opportunistic. His entire life, he made a living as a tent maker and saddler, rather than depending on the favour of benefactors or quacks. If he had accepted gifts, he may have had to compromise his vision of Christianity and his goals for a global church for potential financiers. Today, we would call this “corruption.” And the practice of corruption would have called into question his integrity and the sincerity of his beliefs, which would have threatened his entire undertaking. Because one of St Paul’s biggest advantages in his sales offensive was his unshakeable faith, which he practised without compromise. In this way, by practising what he preached, he combined his vision, his beliefs, and himself in one person. The complications of personal obligation, paybacks, and compromise often come into play when (apparent) gifts are made. These are tactical missteps that St Paul could not afford as he stringently implemented his idea. He knew that among his most important resources for the realisation of his goals were his independence and freedom, and that entanglements and obligations would result in conflict that could dilute his Good News brand.

Summary

St Paul knew what he wanted and what he had to do to get it. He succeeded in getting people excited about Christianity for the long term, even long after he had left a city or region. His influence reached over thousands of years, from his death until the present day. And unlike many companies, which develop their products as if in a bubble – inventing products for which there is no demand – St Paul regularly sought feedback from his “customers,” rather than nursing his vision in an ivory tower. He knew what moved people, and with his patronage of the poor and downtrodden, he was entirely in tune with the spirit of the times and the social crises at the turn of the millennium. With his adaptation of Christianity from Judaism, St Paul created a product that was both highly personalised and appealing to the masses.

Further reading

Etzold, V. (2007), *The First Great Political Realist – Kautilya’s Arthashastra*, Strategy Gallery.

Etzold, V. (2008), “Wall Street revisited”, *Small Cap Magazine*, January.

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