



Taming the Fighter

Transforming the successful product company

Abstract

The *Fighter* salesperson is a tough arm-twisting individual uniquely skilled at selling “killer” products. They have something great to sell and so can’t waste time on the complexities of the customer’s wants and needs. They bring in the sales and they won’t take no for an answer!

But what happens when times change and the sales approach needs to change with it? Ian Henley, Chairman of *ChangeBEAT*, discusses how the act of changing a business from product to solution selling creates predictable conflicts, which if not handled correctly could spell the end of an otherwise successful business.



The *Fighter*

Making hay

Once in a blue moon, an IT company produces a truly *unique product* that makes money for its customers. When this rare event occurs, the sun burns hot. If the customer base is convinced that benefit can be achieved at low risk, a “tornado” market ensues¹. Demand for the *unique product* is overwhelming, and the company has a solemn duty to make money just as fast as it can.

The company must quickly build a supercharged sales force, for the race is on to grab market share. This team must be tough, tenacious, energetic, driven and determined. It won't take “no” for an answer. Remember, it has a *unique product* that makes money for the customer. It's an offer that no customer can be allowed to refuse.

These are the *Fighters* and they walk on fire. They have slogans like “velocity with violence”. The more doors they knock down, the more pitches they make, and the harder they close, the more *unique product* they will sell. Management's job is simple. Define the territory, allocate the number and the commission plan, then lionise, motivate, energise and drive.

Time must not be wasted on the complexity of the customer's wants and needs. For goodness sake, they are making money from the *unique product*, so how much happier do they need to be? Any colour... as long as it's black!

When the tornado blows out

But, as sure as every tornado blows out, you can count on capitalism, sooner or later, to come up with an alternative to the *unique product*. Whilst the company may deny it for a while, falling volumes and collapsing margins speak eloquently of a product whose glory days are past. The reaction from the sales management is bewilderment and anger. “What is going on? I have never missed my numbers before! Aren't we trying hard enough? Let's kick some butt!”

The sales management (the toughest *Fighters* in the company) now go into overdrive, doing what they did to achieve success in the past. They ratchet up the

¹ With acknowledgements to Geoffrey Moore. See “Crossing the Chasm” and “Inside the Tornado”



pressure. They become irascible, more aggressive, and more go-getting. They drive the sales team to exhaustion and chase anything that smells of an opportunity. They fight each other for territory and deals, and they look for someone to blame.

This is a time of great danger for the company, which may go into a downward spiral from which it never recovers. Bad or reckless business is taken to conceal poor sales figures. Customers are alienated as one favour too many is asked. Arm-twisting that used to receive an indulgent smile (“hey, we need that fantastic product, so what’s a few weeks early?”) now gets a resentful scowl. The channel is loaded with product the market is no longer so ready to take. The *Fighter* turns his fire internal, using his formidable persuasive powers to agitate for deep discounts, free services, or accounting sleight of hand, to win one more time.

In the end no amount of effort can conceal the onset of calamity. Exhortations to greater effort are ineffective. The *Fighter* isn’t beaten because he isn’t trying hard. He is beaten because he does not know what to do or how to do it.

The customer is king, again!

It is around this time that the senior management of the company faces facts. “OK, so our product is no longer so unique, but we have built a massive market share and we have cash. We have a competitive edge in our own base. That is a fantastic opportunity. What we need to do,” they say, “is to care about our customers. After all, customers are not interested in products! They are interested in meeting their business needs. We must care about their satisfaction and loyalty. We must understand their businesses and take them the solutions they need. We must build relationships with our customers based on trust. We must be their *Partner*.”

And who could argue with that?

Fire and water

But it is one thing to set a solution strategy and talk about customer loyalty. It is quite another to transform the company’s behaviour to match. Product and solutions sales are as different as fire and water and co-exist about as well. Until those differences are



The Partner



clearly understood there will be friction, frustration and failure at every turn.

Product companies, especially when they have a *unique product*, are duty bound to use a hard, tough approach. Their time in the sun may be short and so their behaviour must be driven. All prospects must be chased and made an offer. Offers must be closed. Impatience is a virtue. The customer's business problems are irrelevant. If a bit of discounting is required to close the order, that is fine, as the margins are fat. The product sale is "as seen" and risk free, so who cares if a few paperwork details are missing? The *Fighter* must push, escalate, browbeat, bend the rules, and do what it takes to get the order, now! They have powerful, assertive personalities and they want a transaction, not a relationship.

But, solutions sales are so very, very different. Solutions are complicated, intangible and much more risky than product sales. Every solution must be meticulously defined and carefully planned. Customers buy solutions from companies they trust. Trust is earned by: caring about the customer's success; patience; competence; knowledge; clear, robust process; accurate, comprehensive and careful proposal documents; team work; and an established record of successful delivery. The *Partner* spends time understanding their customer's needs and applying technical, business and project management skills to address them. The solutions company must live and breathe customer intimacy and work hard for their business.

So *Partners* behave quite differently from *Fighters*. Where the *Fighter* is fire, the *Partner* is flowing water; cool, soothing and comforting. They know there is no quick way to sell a complex solution. They deal expertly with real life complexities such as: business cases; people management; integration with existing systems; managing complex projects; complicated specification; new skills and operating procedures; restructured business processes; solution shaping; warranty; liability; and the management of risk.

The unpleasant fact is, that the **very behaviours** that epitomise the successful *Fighter* salesman, the **very behaviours** reinforced by years of success, high earnings and promotion, are the kiss of death to the solutions sale.



The pain of change

So a new sales approach is required, a *Partner* style, but the sales team consists of *Fighters*. So if they are to survive they must change, and to do that they must first want to, second be able to, and lastly know how to.

Wanting to

A big part of the problem is that many of the behaviours that characterise the successful *Partner* sales professional are not just unfamiliar, but actively odious to many *Fighters* on a gut-emotional level. *Fighters* are testosterone charged and competitive and have built careers on individualism, action, activity and the shortcutting of tedious red tape. Their self-esteem is often tied up with control and machismo and they are often not great team players. These are people who have no patience with a lot of planning, process, risks or details. They even find the idea that they should waste their time on such matters repellent.

To persuade such people to change the way they behave is a tough assignment, and they won't even think about it until they clearly understand that their leaders are quite determined in what they say. Instead they often hear mixed messages. The senior management may talk about change (and may even believe it in their minds) but they often betray their hearts by reverting to type. Painstaking solutions sales are wrecked by management pressure to "get a fast deal on the table". Last day-of-quarter "dodgy deals" still win rich prizes. Orders are rewarded way ahead of successful delivery and, despite many fine words about customer satisfaction, making the number at **any** cost is still value number one.

Part of the unconscious resistance to change is that the senior management worry that if they "go soft" on the *Fighter* sales teams, short-term revenues will suffer. There are many things that can be done to avoid this, but to some extent it may be true. However, unless the issue is faced, the change will take too long and the company will fail. The leaders of the company must be able to explain where they are, how they will change, and produce a business plan to match.



The senior management must themselves show iron commitment to the transformation and clarity in precisely how it will be achieved. The “how” is the thing. Without the “how” the default is to fall back on generalities about customer satisfaction, teamwork and solutions, and generalities are far too loose to achieve rapid change. Instead in-fighting develops between the new guard and the old with their different interpretations of the message.

In-fighting cannot be tolerated at this crucial time. Consequently senior management must become very specific about events that must occur, like clearly defined customer satisfaction reviews, the production of good quality account plans, the universal use of a solution oriented sales call model or the production and sharing of intellectual assets. If there is any room for interpretation, the change will not happen.

In short, the biggest hurdle to change is the senior and middle sales management. An early view has to be taken about those who are ready to understand and want to change and those who do not. Specific coaching must be provided on how *Partner* behaviour is different, and what they must do to change. Those who do not must be moved.

Being able to

Even if the *Fighter* is persuaded to change, you cannot count on them having the right aptitude to do so. Selling solutions is a fundamentally more intellectual process than selling product. It requires flexibility of mind, perception, good interpersonal skills, knowledge and the capability to master new techniques and methods.

The reality is that some of the sales team, and a higher percentage of the sales management (who have been more successful, for longer, working in the old way) will not be able to make the change.

Knowing how to

Many *Fighter* salesmen, however, have flexible minds and plenty of brains. “OK” they say “so now you’re telling me that I’ve got to sell solutions, which is hardware, software and service, right? Great, I am ready and willing.... so how much does one of these services cost? I need to know now, because I’ve got to shift three by the end of the quarter.”



Until they are told otherwise, the sales team will still be opening their sales calls with the *unique product* pitch. They must instead be taught the specifics of a more customer problem led, “consultative” approach and they must practice it until it is second nature, or they will instantly forget it and revert to type. They must also learn what solutions really are and specifically what they need to do to work with a customer in this new way.

At a company level management is no longer simple. Repeatable, consistent processes must be implemented for all key operational, sales and delivery management activities. All *Partner* companies do this because it is critical if consistent delivery is to be achieved and customer satisfaction maintained. It also provides the basis for virtual teams to work together on a local or global scale. The system must be continuously improved. New operational and knowledge management systems must also be provided.

Implementing each of these initiatives represents a substantial change in itself. They must each be thought through in detail, and implemented with talent, commitment and brainpower as part of a coordinated change plan.

Conclusion

The challenge of transforming a successful *Fighter* company into a caring *Partner* is more than most companies can manage. IBM did it, but it took over five years, and most companies do not have the financial strength (or their shareholders the patience) to wait anything like so long.

However, the good news is that management thinking has developed a long way since that time. There is a far better understanding of how a “best practice” *Partner* company operates and so the transformation can be greatly speeded up if the senior management understand the issues, are ready to face them, and are very clear and very specific about what needs to change and how.

Each step in this chain presents formidable hurdles that can only be addressed by a management team with a clear vision, but also with a firm grasp of the specifics of what they are doing and why. They must execute excellently and this will only be possible if the



management work as a team. Anything less will lose more time than the company can afford.

About the author

Ian Henley, chairman of *ChangeBEAT*, is recognised in the IT software and services market as a leading expert in improving business performance. He specialises in business strategy, marketing and sales and is well known through industry publications and Intellect where he provides advanced sales and commercial management training.



ChangeBEAT defines, develops and executes change programmes that help achieve enduring business benefit rapidly and reliably. Our people have practical field experience, and are equipped with WingBEAT, our proven change methodology, and our extensive tools. We are professional, pragmatic and action oriented.

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