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SELLING THE Value of Capability to Leaders

BY MARK LEWIS





I WOULD NOT have failed if I had known what was important to him.

When I heard that the sales staff wanted us to deliver customized user manuals to customers who purchased our software, I panicked. Oh, no! We could barely keep the current user manual up to date, let alone manage the complexities involved in creating multiple, individualized versions of our product documentation. We were incapable of delivering what the business required.

After the initial shock wore off, I focused on learning what it would take to reengineer our content production process to deliver customized content. It quickly became apparent that we would require a new content solution. We would need funding to purchase new software, as well as for related services like configuration, content modeling, and training to tackle this challenge.

When I met with the owner of our company to make the case for providing the sales team with the content they needed, his response was: “No, it’s just documentation.”

Epic fail.

Slightly dazed from the quick rebuff, it dawned on me that I had made a huge mistake. I should have pitched the idea that custom user manuals would be a great selling point, which would address his goal of increasing sales. If I had focused on selling him a capability that mapped to his desire to bring in more revenue (a result he cared about), he might not have dismissed my request abruptly.

Several years later, I started working for a new software company that sold an XML authoring plug-in for Microsoft Word. I thought the product was impressive and that, with a few adjustments, it might make an excellent authoring platform for technical writers.

I knew that many technical writers were looking to produce technical documentation content in XML, a structured content standard that Microsoft Word did not support. If we could create a version of our authoring tool for technical communication professionals who work for organizations that use Microsoft Word, we could sell

our plug-in to those technical writing shops. Creating an optimized version of our plug-in for technical writers would allow us to enable documentation teams to enjoy the benefits of XML authoring without the discomfort and expense of having to move their writers to an entirely new authoring platform. If we got it right, we could open up a new vertical market for our software—and that could translate to an increase in revenue from sales.

While I was relatively new to my role at the company, I knew our CEO loved ideas that increased sales. With this knowledge in mind, I approached him and made my pitch. This time around, I sold the value of the capabilities I wanted him to fund and explained how those changes would lead to revenue generation. I asked for funding—and I got it! We built the product and successfully created a new revenue stream for our firm.

Fear of the unknown is powerful. You can also use fear to sell. Executives have seen digital transformation's ability to disrupt entire industries, displacing market leaders (think Blockbuster, Eastman Kodak). No executives today want to find themselves on the list of companies whose leaders failed to adapt to the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

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To gain funding for a content production initiative, find out if the executives who hold the purse strings are afraid of disruption. If so, your job is much easier. If you're hoping to move to intelligent content, for example, focusing on capabilities you'll gain—like *adaptability* (the ability to quickly respond and adjust to changes in the marketplace)—might be an excellent place to start. Intelligent content, by definition, is *adaptable*.

Don't waste time trying to sell the solution. Sell the capability to adapt. Sell the ability to adjust as an

enterprise capability, a scalable capacity that spans departments. For example, sales and marketing might determine that the customer-journey content needs significant change or personalization. No problem. You can adapt your content to future needs and formats not yet known.

Learn the goals of the executives. Sell them on capabilities that address those goals.

If the capability that you need is too much to build in a single effort, you might have to make it in stages. The best way to communicate the progression of change that you need to make is to use a maturity model. I've used maturity models often to sell the value of an intelligent content solution, but I was typically selling to a documentation manager.

Regardless, the components of the pitch are the same. For each stage, specify the following:

- ▶ The investment
- ▶ The result
- ▶ The return/benefit (new capability)
- ▶ The business goal addressed by the realization of the new capability

This information will inform your *capability maturity model*. The model shows the return on investment at each stage of the initiative, so executives understand where the value is coming from and how you plan to develop it. A new capability must map to one or more business goals. Your capability maturity model should address the concerns and objectives of your executive leadership.

As writers, one of the first things we do before we begin writing is to make sure that we understand our audience. We need to understand their goals, desires, fears, and language. (I discuss learning how to be an “executive whisperer” in “Authors Must Be Multilingual or Fail.”)

Know your audience. Know their goals. Show how a capability—or set of capabilities—maps to business goals. Sell the value. Win. ■

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