



Farming, not fishing

Spiritual salesmanship may seem like the ultimate oxymoron, but **Bhaavin Shah** offers a new approach that brings together these polarities to form an approach that is respectful, non aggressive and long-term oriented

While on a recent holiday to Sri Lanka, our tour operator took my family and me to a certain spice garden, one of Sri Lanka's prime tourist spots. Once in, we were allotted a personal guide who took us around the entire property, sharing details of each plantation in exquisite detail. Thereafter, he took us to the garden's shop where he extolled the herbal medicines prepared from these spices. So convinced were we that we purchased many

of the shop's products, though they were exorbitantly priced.

It was only after half an hour of our departure from the location that it dawned upon us that we had had a bad deal. It then became clear that the courteous guide was actually an undercover salesman, and the whole purpose of the paid guided tour was for it to culminate in an extravagant sale.

This is what I call traditional marketing - a marketing whose entire purpose is to achieve a sale instead of an earnest customer. Owing to such experiences, many people cringe when accosted by a salesman. I am one

of them. This explains why (besides the fact that I am a spiritual aspirant and an introvert to boot), I have an equal horror of glamourising my own offerings. Hence marketing was a taboo word for me.

Inbound marketing

But only until I bumped into a very talented friend of mine, now my sales coach - Paresh Patel. As unlikely as it may seem, Paresh familiarised me with a sublime form of marketing - Inbound marketing, a term that has become almost synonymous with its founding organisation, an American agency called Hubspot - which is based on spiritual principles.

As Paresh puts it, the Inbound concept is more like a philosophy than a marketing technology; more like a culture than a policy. It is valid in every area of business, be it sales, HR, or sourcing, and applies to all interactions with customers. It is also equally effective offline as well as online. It understands that buyers' behaviors has drastically changed in the last two decades, and therefore needs an approach aligned to that change.

Here are some of its key tenets:

Empathy

Customer experience is the key differentiator in today's world. After all, your customer is the reason you are in business and the difference you make in his life is the purpose of your business. So it is imperative to remember that no customer is comfortable being pursued and persuaded. One of the key guiding principles of the inbound philosophy is not doing unto others what you don't like being done unto you. So don't become that formidable salesman (almost sounds like an abominable snowman) that you yourself dread.



Service with a smile is a surefire way to get repeat customers

Non-intrusion

Traditional marketing, as we know it, is not just aggressive but interruptive. Billboards that hover over our heads along the full length of a city's main roads add nothing to the driving experience. Repetitive ads that are blasted into our faces while enjoying our favourite programme on television is everyone's pet aversion. Even worse are the phone calls that interrupt your work only to sell you a personal or business loan. And how did they get your number? We live in an age where we have been reduced to mere data; data that is sold over the counter for a few paise per contact. To me, this kind of marketing is anything but ethical.

Non aggression

To take the same argument further, marketing should not be about hammering your



The internet is a perfect place for inbound marketing

presence and carving a niche in somebody's head with maximum recall value. In an attempt to get customer attention advertisers stoop to creating ads so provocative or edgy that they become fodder for coffee table conversations. Another fall-out of their massive advertising campaigns is that they cancel out each other's efforts to outsmart the competition. At the end of the day it is the product that takes the bill and it is the consumer that takes the hit.

Marketing as we have known it, is generally out-bound. It is about reaching out to any and every person, rather than creating conditions for a matching prospect himself reaching out to you. In contrast, Inbound marketing is about creating visibility and letting your presence be known. It is pull-driven and not push-driven. As the term implies it is about the customer being bound inwards.

Customers come in all fits and sizes. One has to understand the central tenet that not every person is your potential customer and hence he should not be disturbed. So a push-based approach breaks the tacit norms of acceptable behavior. A person going on a search engine like Google and typing in what he needs and landing with a matching result is an example of an acceptable pull-driven approach. Getting a website visitor to leave his mail id with your website because he wants to receive updates and information

from you is a pull-driven approach. Creating visibility through advertising in a good trade journal of your industry, where people are looking for ads like yours, is again a pull-driven approach. The marketing guru, Seth Godin, chooses to call this type of marketing Permission marketing. It is this element of non-aggression and non-intrusion that makes this form of marketing fundamentally spiritual.

Delayed gratification

Another sin of traditional marketing is its short-term focus. Huge ad campaigns use neuroscientific techniques and manipulate people's unconscious brains and their emotional instincts. Such marketing gets people to take influenced decisions rather than studied decisions. The Inbound methodology reverses this paradigm. It doesn't approve of short-term gratification. It lets the prospect take his own time to study your content and product, ask questions, evaluate answers and then decide at his own pace. Inbound is at ease with this delayed gratification, all for the sake of the customer.

Substance over style

Traditional marketing is about hyping up your product so much that it becomes irresistible; inbound is to emanate the merit of the product as naturally as a flower emanates fragrance, causing your target audience to flock to you thanks to the superb word-of-mouth references.

Another principle of inbound is to give buyers information they love and not live on promises alone. The buyer wants to have a peep into what you are and not

on what you project about yourself. The buyer wants to feel your thought processes. This can only be done through quality content and not stylish packaging, which is already a thing of the past. Content is the heart of the inbound process. We are once again moving into a world that values substance over packaging. Hurray!

Harnessing thr Internet

The thing to remember as a 21st century marketer - whether your product is business to business (B2B) or business to consumer (B2C), is that the Internet is the best space to be. Whether you are selling brooms or books, internet is a 24 x 7 trade fair visited by half the world. It's very easy to create your sales funnel through your web-based marketing assets - your digital properties like your website, your independent landing pages, your blog, your social media, your regular mailers and free downloadable e-books. Ensure that your content on all these is rich.

The richer your content, the more the buyer understands what your thought processes are. The purpose of the content is to find the sweet spot - the audience that automatically resonates with what you have to say. Let's take an example to illustrate how this pull-driven system works.

Let us assume that our marketer is a manufacturer of transformers. In order to avail of inbound principles, he needs to write blog posts dedicated to answering the queries and addressing the main points that a typical buyer of transformers might have - say the purchase officer of a real estate company who needs transformers on a regular basis.

A Google search result by this officer lands him on a website, which hosts a free e-book. He likes the blurb, asks for the e-book and receives the e-book over mail. On finding the content of the e-book useful, he subscribes to regular educational information related to transformers via mailers from the website. Having exhibited so much interest, he qualifies as what we can call a lead. The lead's online behavior related to these mailers is now tracked and measured such as whether he opens the mail or not, and whether he accesses other links through the opened mail. Through these measurement techniques, a lead score is assessed and the automated software sets off the next set of articles, selected on the basis of the lead score, to be sequentially fired to the lead. A lead that stops taking interest is dropped. A lead that is fully interested goes ahead and

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sooner or later becomes a customer. A lead that takes just enough interest is nurtured through further relevant information until he chooses to become a customer or drops out. It doesn't end here.

Once the customer buys and tastes the product, he goes ahead and often becomes a promoter of the product. This entire journey of a buyer from a stranger to a visitor to a lead to a customer to a promoter is undertaken at the pace and willingness of the buyer while answering all his queries and educating him with free relevant information. Full empathy, no intrusion, no aggression, lots of patience and lots of substance. This is how one spiritualises the process of marketing. Can you do the buyer a greater service?

Spiritual marketing is not about converting non-customers into customers; it's just about using the inbound methodology for finding ready customers for your products and empathetically nurturing those that are half-way on their purchase journey with you. Its less like fishing and more like farming.



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