

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
PART 1 - INFORMATION OVERLOAD	4
PART 2 - HOW WE BUY	5
PART 3 - HOW WE SELL	7
PART 4 - FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN	9
PART 5 - MIND THE GAP	11
CONCLUSION	12

INTRODUCTION

“THE GREAT GROWLING ENGINE OF CHANGE - TECHNOLOGY”

Industry 4.0. Digitalization. AI. Big Data. Chances are that you've reached saturation point when it comes to the overwhelming number of buzz-words and phrases flying around the blog-o-sphere. They've been used so many times that they've almost lost meaning. So, instead, let's ask a simple question.

Why should you care?

Maybe your sales teams are producing great numbers and your product is flying off the (real and virtual) shelves. What difference does the concept of, say, 'machine learning' really make to your daily life?

Today, the answer might be 'not a great deal'. Tomorrow? Well, that's a whole different story...



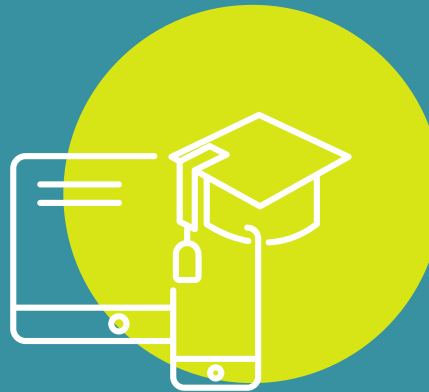
PART 1 - INFORMATION OVERLOAD

“KNOWLEDGE IS THE MOST DEMOCRATIC SOURCE OF POWER”

Business is going through an era of almost unprecedented technological disruption. While it's possible to point to other periods in history that have shaped the way we consume goods, from the industrial revolution to the rise of modern advertising and tv, at no previous time has so much information been so readily and cheaply available to the mass market. The internet has fundamentally changed the way we consume data - empowering individuals to make decisions (and purchases) with a number of options at

their fingertips which would have been inconceivable in the last century.

So, any study of the changing world of sales must first consider what's changed about the way we buy.



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PART 2 - HOW WE BUY

“THE FUTURE ALWAYS COMES TOO FAST AND IN THE WRONG ORDER”

The way we buy has undergone a paradigm shift, empowered primarily by technological disruptors that have changed the way that we access information. Consumers are no longer merely passive recipients of advertising from major brands, they are also actively engaged in the process of how those products are marketed towards them. Information flow, previously linear from producer to customer, has become more complex, with the customer moving towards the heart of the process. Our likes, dislikes, ratings for everything from hotel rooms to vacuum cleaners,

has changed the dynamic, providing real-time feedback in a way that would have been inconceivable even a decade ago. Conventional distinctions between traditional ‘bricks and mortar’ operations and e-commerce have become similarly blurred. A study of 30 leading retailers in North America, EMEA, and APAC into the ‘robo’ economy (research online, buy offline) found that readily available consumer information had an impact not just on online purchases, but in-store ones as well, with 56% of online shoppers reading reviews prior to purchase and 45% offline.



“The customer will become so integrated into the production process that we will find it more and more difficult to tell just who is actually the consumer and the producer.”

The impact of technology (in the form of global, freely available data) is gradually breaking down the walls between the traditional definitions not just of online vs. offline, but also those of B2B vs. B2C, with a new wave of customer-centric H2H (human to human) thinking taking center stage.

So, with information so freely available (and in such massive and ever-increasing volumes), the customer decision process has evolved. Products, whether physical or in the form of services, are, quite literally, more than the sum of their parts - a customer, choosing between two seemingly equivalent products, will make a decision based on a much broader range of factors than the product alone, many of them more emotional than logical. The question for the seller, therefore, is how to differentiate their product in a saturated market - differentiation which requires a major step forward from traditional sales techniques.

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PART 3 - HOW WE SELL

“THE FIRST RULE OF SURVIVAL IS CLEAR:
NOTHING IS MORE DANGEROUS THAN
YESTERDAY’S SUCCESS”

It’s not just about the product, it’s about value. Value comes in all shapes and sizes – in a B2B context, it might mean the added value that a product or service adds to a company’s bottom line. In a retail sense, value might be attained by other, less tangible benefits – such as customer experience, trust, or brand loyalty.

The world’s biggest retailer, Amazon, doesn’t just ‘sell’ in the conventional sense – it’s an enabler of purchasing.

Their business model is predicated in a large part on communication more than the product – they have fully incorporated the buyer into the process of sales, with brand credibility being built upon feedback and peer review.

‘Social selling’, where the building of relationships is an integral part of the sales process, is a great example of this new paradigm. The aim is to build a relationship with the customer which reaches beyond the transactional nature of a mere purchase.

Research conducted by the University of British Columbia (who first viewed the topic from a scientific perspective) discovered that where similarities existed between buyer and seller, a sale was more likely to take place.

While this is nothing new (and not that surprising), it is the role of technology that has taken this concept forward, since it is now possible to identify those similarities through the volume of personal information that we voluntarily provide about ourselves – information that can be used to establish a fast – and profitable – bond.

The concept of relationship building has broader implications in the way we now sell. ‘Value-Based Selling’, whereby we look at the value that a given product or service has to the purchaser, rather than just the cost, demands a radically different perspective than was previously the case.

A conventional sales process might involve telling the customer about the product features and price – value-based selling is based on an understanding of how a product or service can help the customer to be more efficient, drive revenue, or reduce costs or risks. These benefits of the product to the customer (both tangible and intangible) minus the cost of the product constitutes its value.

In order to determine the value of the product, therefore, we need to understand the customer’s needs. In simple terms, a good sales rep will move from being a product expert, to a customer expert.



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PART 4 - FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

“FUTURE SHOCK IS THE DIZZYING DISORIENTATION BROUGHT ON BY THE PREMATURE ARRIVAL OF THE FUTURE”

As a species, we fear what we don't understand - and nowhere is this more relevant than with technology. There is a very real (and valid) concern over specific technologies (such as AI) rendering our jobs obsolete. This resistance from a workforce to disruptive technologies is nothing new. In the early 19th century, a group of English textile workers, known as the Luddites, led a five-year campaign of machine breaking

and destruction, protesting at the “fraudulent and deceitful manner” in which their employers were using new technologies to get around inconvenient labor laws. Their fear was that these machines would render their years of training and skills obsolete. The rebellion ended violently, with legislation being passed that made the breaking of machines a crime punishable by the death penalty.

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“New categories of jobs will emerge, partly or wholly displacing others...”

While it's easy to understand the Luddites' fear of obsolescence, their fate is a telling example of the futility of swimming upstream against the current of technological progress. In their 2018 report, 'The Future of Jobs', the World Economic Forum has the following to say regarding the way in which new technologies will

interact with socio-economic and demographic factors:

“New categories of jobs will emerge, partly or wholly displacing others. The skill sets required in both old and new occupations will change in most industries and transform how and where people work.”

The changing nature of purchasing habits is, by definition, going to have a major impact upon the composition of any company's workforce - forcing a major rethink of the skills needed to embrace this paradigm shift.

PART 5 - MIND THE GAP

“TO SURVIVE, THE INDIVIDUAL MUST BECOME INFINITELY MORE ADAPTABLE AND CAPABLE THAN EVER BEFORE”

The problem, therefore, is that the sophistication of buying techniques is always just a little bit ahead of how we sell. This isn't that surprising - implementing new technologies and the skills with which to employ them over an entire workforce will always have some lead time. What's critical is that this lead time is minimized.

The solution therefore lies in raising the level of relevant competencies and skills in the shortest period of time - while

there might be sophisticated digital tools to market and sell, without properly trained staff to operate them there is always a disconnect between buying and selling. As various studies into the human/technology paradox have noted:

“technology implementations fail rarely because the technology did not work but rather because people are not willing, or find it too difficult, to use them”.

A recent survey conducted by Wiley Education Services and Future Workplace of 600 HR managers discovered that...

...64% observed a skills gap within their companies, up from...

...52% the previous year.

CONCLUSION

“THE ILLITERATE OF THE 21ST CENTURY WILL NOT BE THOSE WHO CANNOT READ AND WRITE, BUT THOSE WHO CANNOT LEARN, UNLEARN, AND RELEARN”

Not all training is created equal – it’s about reaction times. Conventional classroom-based training can be an excellent tool and serves a genuine purpose, but training that is exclusively conducted in this way is, by definition, going to be one step behind, since it must always be reactive rather than proactive. Training techniques that rely too heavily upon the production of bulky, one-size-fits-all resources are always going to be playing catch-up.

To design an effective training solution you need to understand sales. To understand sales you need to know how and why people buy. The speed with which these factors evolve demands a training solution that can adapt as quickly as the market, evolving in parallel with consumers’ purchasing habits.



You need a system that is customized, modular, flexible and fast. Welcome to Mercuri International.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE WEF REPORT:

4 specific technological drivers of change:

Ubiquitous high-speed mobile internet
Artificial intelligence
Widespread adoption of big-data analytics
Cloud technology

Changing nature of production chains:

74% surveyed prioritizing 'skilled local talent' when locating their business
50% expect automation to lead to full-time workforce reduction by 2022...
...but 38% anticipate extending workforce with new 'productivity-enhancing roles'
human/machine split of task hours to move from 71%/29% to 58%/42% by 2022

Emerging in-demand 'technical' roles:

Data analysts and scientists
Software and application developers
E-commerce and social media specialists

Growth in roles that leverage distinctly 'human' skills:

Customer service
Sales and marketing
Training and development

Creation of entirely new roles:

AI, machine learning, and Big Data specialists
Process automation experts
User experience and human-machine interaction designers

Skills instability/reskilling:

The proportion of core skills required to do a job to shift by 42% by 2022
By 2022, 54% of all employees will require significant re- and up-skilling

REFERENCES/FUTURE READING:

McKinsey

[‘Skill shift: Automation and the future of the workforce’](#)

[‘Technology, jobs, and the future of work’](#)

World Economic Forum

[‘The Future of Jobs Report 2018’](#)

Gartner

[‘Gartner predicts the future of AI technologies’](#)

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Christopher A. Chung

‘Human issues in technology implementation
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Exercises 21 (1994)

“All section headlines are direct quotes from American author, futurist and businessman Alvin Toffler, who coined the phrase ‘future shock’ in his 1970 book of the same name. Toffler defined future shock as ‘too much change in too short a period of time’ and many of his observations are hugely relevant today.”



Every year Mercuri International empowers companies in over 50 countries to achieve sales excellence. We serve our clients both locally and globally with customized solutions and industry expertise. We grow profit through people, providing the tools and processes to tackle any sales challenge.

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