

One Knight in Product - E144 - Brent Adamson

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SPEAKERS

Brent Adamson, Jason Knight



Jason Knight 00:00

Hello and welcome to the show in the second of a two part series where we're going to learn how to sell sell sell. Although actually in this episode is more like helping people to buy, buy, buy, but Wait, isn't that the same? In a word? Not really. But don't worry all become clear. Speaking of buying this podcast is free, but if you'd want to show your support, then there's a handy donate link on the podcast website one night in product.com. All contributions are gratefully received and stopped me but in person ads all over the place. But even if you don't want to do that, I'd still love you to come across, check out some of my other episodes, subscribe to the podcast wherever you do that sort of thing, or join me on social media to make sure you never miss another episode again. So that's the end of that sales pitch. But if you want to find out how to go beyond the Challenger sale, and not just break the frame, but make a new one, keep listening. So my guest tonight is Brent Adamson, once of renowned author, speaker and researcher passionate about productive disruption and apparently has the biggest crystal ball in b2b sales. Before he started gazing into his Seeing Stone, he was a professor of German and Applied Linguistics at Michigan State. Moving on to co author the Rosetta Stone of b2b sales 2011 The Challenger sale before following up with the Babel fish of b2b customers, but 2015 is a challenger customer, a book which aims to help you uncover the hidden influencer that can multiply your results. Unfortunately, it does need an update because I've heard all the influences are on Tik Tok these days. I Brent, how are you tonight?



Brent Adamson 01:33

I'm good, Jason, it's great to talk to you.



Jason Knight 01:35

It's good to have you here. And I'm looking forward to challenging a few things tonight. Before we start, I do have to call out that I did interview your co author, co conspirator. And either the Batman to your Robin or the Robin to your Batman Matt Dixon recently. And I'm going to be very desperately trying to avoid duplicating effort. But if I do ask you any of the same

questions, you can assume it's a no Mr. And Mrs. Style attempt to make sure you're telling the same story so perfect. Don't feel too offended. Target. But first things first, this is definitely not gonna be the same. Let's find out about you. These days, you're the Global Head of Research and communities at ecosystems. So what problem does or do ecosystems solve for its customers.

B

Brent Adamson 02:15

So ecosystems is a just like every other company in the world these days as a software as a service platform is exactly right, since I joined eco about four months ago, ecosystems provides customers a software platform, which they can then use in turn with their customers in order to sit down collaboratively and identify the dimensions of value along which they want to measure a relationship all the way from top of the funnel down through sales, into implementation, renewal and expansion. So it's a thing that is almost like an operating system for value. Jason, if you want to do that. I know, right? It's it's actually an advertising. It's extremely what I kind of do I write words for a living, but it's extremely cool software that basically helps whoever in your commercial organisation have a better value based conversation and build a value based relationship with their customer.



Jason Knight 03:02

Well, there you go, I'm sold. But how does that fit in with some of the other tools that sales teams might be looking at? So obviously, there's Salesforce and equivalent, there's stuff like Gong, which we use at work, but yeah, is it kind of covering any of the use cases that you'd normally do through one of those, or is it very much complimentary? Often,

B

Brent Adamson 03:18

it's complimentary, it certainly all fits together. So it's, you know, it's fully integrated, and all that kind of stuff you want to know about, or maybe you don't want to know about, but some do. But the, the, you know, it's actually if I could just, there's, there's actually, it's really interesting discipline and the commercial organisation, which I'm relatively new to, but it's been around for about 20 years called Value Engineering or value management, and there's whole functions built around value, you can trace its most of its legacy back to Oracle and SAP, there's now like this SAP diaspora of value executives around the world, and that's where our company got started, it was the company that helped SAP all those years ago, build that software system that eventually then became their internal system and, and our product. And I think what's interesting about that, Jason is that, you know, it's funny, because I've talked to heads of sales. Every day, for the last 20 years, I've got, you know, I talked to a vast number of commercial leaders in sales and marketing. And very few if any of them have ever said, you know, we need Brent, we need a Value Engineering platform. But when I look at what ecosystem does around hypothesis, lead discovery around, you know, sequence of events, building around, you know, total cost of ownership calculations, all that kind of stuff. That's exactly what they're asking for is how do I, if you're, if you're a customer, particularly in a, in a, in a recurring revenue model, given where we are today, if your customer is going to go have a

hard conversation with their CFO about your product, and whether or not it's justifiable or not, you want to make sure that both you and your customers are prepared to have that conversation. So that's, that's where we live.



Jason Knight 04:42

That sounds good. And we're gonna come back to the value stuff in a bit. Yep. Probably a bit dismissive to call it stuff but, you know, I mean, sounds good. You know, I mean, but what does the Global Head of Research and communities ecosystems do like so what's your day to day job? I mean, I can understand the words Searching communities and maybe get a little bit but specifically, what do you do?



Brent Adamson 05:03

I build communities and conduct research. So so the question, exactly all joking aside, but the so it ecosystems.us, which is our website, and soon to change over to IO by the way.io, for those not Google, I know. But the we've actually prior to my arrival, and then since then have built out a community of over 1000 professionals, commercial professionals involved in value. So I'm working on building that out, making more robust, more interactive, putting my content to it, you name it. And then really at the end day, because I know you want to talk about this a little bit. Funny enough, although I've been writing about sales and professional selling and marketing for the better part of 20 years. I'm not a professional seller I have I've been in Brazilian sales calls, I've sat there and watched the clothes, I've done the clothes myself, but I've never actually had a quota, which to me is the ultimate definition of it. Right? Because, you know, Gil? Yeah, so we'll come back to that. But you know, the what I am, as I'm a researcher and food prior to, as you mentioned, prior to joining CB which became a corporate Corporate Executive Board, which became CB, which became Gartner, which were a departed a couple months ago, I was an academic prior to that, so as trained in linguistics and social sciences. And so that's a 30 year career of just taking really big, hairy, complex problems and trying to understand them as best I can and best weekend with with colleagues, and then writing about them teaching about and presenting them. And that's that's kind of where the red thread lies for me. So I'll continue to do that. Now. Nico, is just that the target changes a little bit around value, but let's face it, the heart and soul of sales or marketing is value. So it's kind of the same stuff.



Jason Knight 06:35

No, absolutely. And it's really interesting, I think, and I chat to Matt, about this to the fact that neither of you like you both, yeah, contributed to the one of the desk references for b2b sales. But neither of you have been that kind of person sitting at the end of the phones have their cigarette, their big ashtray full of cigarettes desperately trying to close that last sale, which is, I think this is, you know, what I said to him, as well as like, it's really interesting, because there could be a kind of certain lack of, for one of a better word, credibility, but with some of those types of people, when you're sitting there saying, hey, sales folks do this, and they're like, Well, you know, screw you, you know, you've never done this for a living. But have you managed to kind of burst that bubble or overcome that objection? Or did it never really come up?

 B**Brent Adamson 07:15**

It would come up, but I certainly wouldn't. I wouldn't create a situation where it would like force it to come up, right. So for example, I don't put my PhD on my title. I don't call myself Dr. Adam centre, Brent adamson.com, a PhD, I just park all that because it just raises questions that can get distracting. I'm not, by the way, I'm not trying to hide it, nor am I embarrassed by it at all. But the I just don't want it to become a distraction. But But I think there's a longer conversation that maybe we have time for today with Jason, but there is a first of all, there's room for both. So that person who was a head of sales or a sales professional for 2030 years writing about their experience and the nitty gritty, the way we work as researchers, Matt, and I've always, you know, we talked to hundreds and hundreds of salespeople and sales leaders, and then bring to that a rigour around research methodology. And I think there's just room for both. And I think most people ultimately do there. There is this broad sort of section of society today in our mutual countries that is dismissive of anything scientific in general. That's more troubling, frankly. Yeah, in fact, it's quite troubling. But that's, that's not something I've run into much in the sales profession, per se. So with a few I've been selling for 30 years, get out of my way, let me show you how it's done. There's a little bit of that. But I find we can usually square that circle pretty quickly. Yeah, it's

**Jason Knight 08:25**

interesting, actually, there are a lot of parallels with product management. So the world that I spend my day to day in which is around like, we don't have to be the expert in the industry, we don't have to be the customer ourselves. Our job is to go out there and synthesise the best of all of that, and then bring that back and build a proper business case. And that's right, proper product strategy and all of that good stuff. So feels like there's a lot of parallels there. And I think we'd probably like you say, we could have a lot longer discussion about all the ins and outs of that.

 B**Brent Adamson 08:49**

But it comes down to I think, for all of us in your world mind, to storytelling and really good storytelling, right? So how can I take all these different inputs, whether it's research based, quantitative, qualitative, just anecdotal, and put it together in a way that's compelling? That makes sense that's defensible. And then it gets people excited about it and moving in a certain direction. And I think whatever profession anyone's in that's one's ability to tell compelling defensible stories is an incredibly powerful skill.

**Jason Knight 09:16**

Now, absolutely. And obviously touches on the book topic as well. And I guess, yeah, one question that I should ask and obviously, given that you've written now, these two books, which have a very well regarded within the b2b sales community, but as we said, you've not been a salesman yourself. Yeah. Why did you decide at the beginning of all this, that it was a good area to get into given your academic background and given the fact that you've not been on the phones been on the job yourself? Like, was there any particular thing that attracted you to sales? Was it just an interesting area? or was there some other kind of trigger for that? Oh,

 B**Brent Adamson 09:46**

no, it was even more arbitrary than that. It was pure pure luck, or a Kismet or just like a lining of planets. So So again, I was I was a professor I was halfway to tenure at Michigan State and German and linguistics. went and got a long story again, pocket ultimately chose to move out of academics but I went got an MBA at the University of Michigan did that and night school teaching during the day at Michigan State. For the American listeners, I don't know why that's problematic, the to hate each other. But in any case, then in going through the recruiting process coming out of the business school, Michigan, Blum holder's, his company called Corporate Executive Board, they were looking for researchers, and I thought, well, that's perfect. I'm a researcher. So one thing led to another. And there's this the hearts of the question to answer your question. Oh, Jason, is it just so happens that the research opening that they had at that quarter was in sales, that centre was I interviewed, like for three different research positions, and I could have been an I&d guy, I could have been a supply chain guy. Turns out I happen to wind up being a sales guy. Isn't that wild? So that's there it is.

**Jason Knight 10:43**

That is incredible. And I'm just imagining all the other books and all the other branches of the multiverse that there could be out there right now.

 B**Brent Adamson 10:50**

Really thought about the multiverse is all sorts of Challenger supply chain or guy all sorts of crazy stuff, the

**Jason Knight 10:56**

challenge of procurement. That's right. That's definitely something that when a copy like that, and registered the domain afterwards as well. Right, so you co wrote the Challenger sale with Matt, as we said, Yeah, I've spoken to him about that already. So let's talk about a challenger customer, which is another book that you okay with Matt as well. But there's one really interesting thing that I spotted when I was looking at both of those books now. I mean, I've got the Challenger sale behind me, as I showed you, but yeah, I've only got an e book of the Challenger customer. But I didn't notice that on the Challenger sale. It's Matt, then you. Yeah. And on the challenge of customer is you then map now that calls to mind some of the stories I've read about Steve McQueen, and Paul Newman, on The Towering Inferno poster where they were both battling for top spot. So was it kind of almost like a you can have one I can have the other or is one of them his book and one of middle your book?

 B**Brent Adamson 11:48**

Now? In fact, I would say neither of them are my book or his book, what they really are, is and if no one reads acknowledgments I know, but it was nonetheless important to us that we acknowledae in the acknowledgments. the broader team that was really instrumental in

producing all this work. Yeah, there easily could have been two more authors, if not three more on the cover of the Challenger sale. The publisher back then, when we're young and naive, said you should only have two authors. So we took them off. And I regret it to this day, because they never got their full credit Karen Freeman into marriage almost. But the and then by the time, the second one came around, the first one was so successful, they kind of let us do whatever we wanted. It's a it's a personal, it's not an extra, there's nothing deep or dark about it. Matt was one notch above me in the hierarchy and ran the sales practice with when we read the first one. So he said, I think I'll put my name first. And that was gonna argue with him. But then the second world around, he had moved out of sales and into the financial services practice. I was leading the charge on the second book, along with Nick Tolman and Pat spinner. And I said, Hey, Matt, why don't we just flip the order? And he said, that's totally fine. But it was it was, you know, we're good friends, and we get along great. So, yeah, there you go. It's not it's a non story. But that's what happened. Ya



Jason Knight 12:50

know, it's always good to look behind the headlines, but I guess it really then calls into question like, who was the Batman? And who was the Robin? But you know, it sounds like you're both just different back then. So that's right.



Brent Adamson 13:02

Yes. We're bad people, bad people.



Jason Knight 13:05

Bad. But the challenge of customer? Yeah, as we said, was a follow up for the Challenger sale. So I guess that then, yeah, if we talk about the Challenger sale very, very briefly, and sort of talk about the fact that it was a book that really shook the world of b2b sales up and kind of busted a few myths about, like, what the most effective type of salesperson was, the behaviours that they undertook, and the way that they got to the sale. So we don't need to go into all of that again. But yeah, I guess. The question is, why then did you feel the need to write a book, a sequel or follow up book, the challenger customer talking about how to get those advocates within a company? Like what made you decide to write that book? And I guess, by extension, what story were you trying to tell?



Brent Adamson 13:51

Well, there's there's, we just had a lot more to say, first of all, so there was questions came out the first one particularly around insight, and what is the nature of insight? How do I construct this insight? How do I deploy so a lot of really tactical questions which we we left are unanswered, not on purpose. We've heard because we weren't sure either. So we learned a lot. We've actually learned a tonne between the first and the second. So we wanted to capture that. But I think more importantly, and we knew that actually, shortly after the second one, we sat on that second book for a while because what I felt pretty strongly is we needed a protagonist and it was when we found this idea of this what we call the mobilizer is the is the

protagonist of the second story, the challenger customers were that it made sense to actually write a book. The other thing though, Jason, I would tell you in some ways, I think actually, for what it's worth, Matt agrees with me. The second book is the better book. Because it's a richer, there's more going on, there's more depth and texture to it. And it's a book written for marketers as much as it's written for salespeople. But I think the most important thing on the second book *The Challenger customer*, is that it was it marked a change in our research focus from selling to buying that is continuing today. So yeah, so when I think of all the work that I was involved in at CB and then Gartner subsequently that where we rolled out it is like buyer enablement and sense making, which are both have been published in HBr, as well since then, is that really the bigger story. And I think that's true for all of us in sales, the bigger story in sales in the last 10 years is not how selling has changed, but how buying has changed. And I think in the last five years, and particularly about how buying is not only changed, but how customers are struggling to buy in the first place, we're struggling to decide which of course is the subject of Matt's new book that jolt effect, this is coming out. Yeah. So I think that's if you want to kind of trace the lineage of like all of the work that I've been involved that Matt's been involved in the last 1012 years around buying, it all traces back to the Challenger customers, the first foray into that world.



Jason Knight 15:39

Yeah, it's really interesting, looking at the book, again, and trying to sort of pull out some key facts. And yeah, one of the things I found really interesting was this idea. And I don't know if that number still holds, or if it's even worse, but then it takes like 5.4 people within an organisation to make a purchase decision. And those 5.4 people 57% through the process before they even speak to suppliers in the first place. So there's a big education piece that they they're kind of doing on their own. That's right, to a lesser extent, yeah.



Brent Adamson 16:07

So you know, that 5.4 is we hammered that number for about the better part of three years, when that book came out, it almost became like, branded like 5.4 tm or something trademark, right. And then, of course, that we continue to research and every every year in our research, a number would go up, it would go to 6.8. And then it went to seven point something, which told me like, never again, will ever try and brand a number or a research result. But the you know, now we've reported at least when I departed Gartner in May we were reporting it as a range just because at some point, the numbers were going up so high so fast. Our chief of research guy, numeric brand new, so you can't report that numbers. Just no one's gonna believe it. And it was like 12, or 13, or 14. And so we felt hesitant. Put the number on a slide. puzzle was an apples to apples with the original set of questions. So there's some technical stuff there. But so we usually reported is like five to 11, or five to 10, or six to 11, something like that. But invariably, what I hear JSON is, no matter how high I go with the number, someone will tell me Oh, that's not high enough, right? It's just, I don't know you. I'm actually at Eco right now. I'm involved in a sale where I think I personally have talked to 1520 Different people already. And you know, it's just part of it is to get a pilot off the ground, right. But that's kind of where we are today.



Jason Knight 17:14

But that's something that then if you think about some of the sales methodologies like med pick and stuff, where you're trying to work out the economic buyer try and work out who's the decision maker? Who do I go to? Who's got the budget? Who's gonna sign this off? Yeah. A lot of the Challenger customers talking about really starting a bit downstream of that person and trying to basically find someone that you have ready access to someone who's basically pretty talkative and that you know, what their problems are, some of that's gonna be very open minded and want to be educated. Yeah. Well, is that like a controversial thing to be suggesting to people that have been conditioned to try and find that top of the tree person that has the money in the wallet?

B

Brent Adamson 17:50

Yeah. So when when the book first came out, you'll remember so you know, med pick and my son and my, by the way, this is if it's unfair to med pick, I apologise the med pick users out there, but I see this is sort of warmed over sounds really fun. I'm gonna say, Wow,



Jason Knight 18:03

this is good.

B

Brent Adamson 18:04

I guess I just said warmed over, did I but it feels like it feels like band 2.0. Right. It feels like it's like this year is band two, which is budget authority, need and time. Yep. And it's very similar to that. At the very least, I think we can all fairly say that. And in many ways, challenge a customer, this idea of what's called a mobilizer. And all the work that went around, it was very much a reaction to BANT. Because there's actually a chapter on the cutting room floor of the Challenger customer, it was all too complex. And the data was a little, it was just complicated. So we ultimately took it out of the story to streamline it, but we were doing a lot of work back then around the difference between what we call emerging demand and established demand and established demand is simply your customer knows exactly what they want. They invite you into the column fodder, right? So you're in the Bake Off, and you're only there to compete on price, and this is a bad place to be. And the argument part of the argument back then was look, if you can actually establish clear BANT for that opportunity. So this person definitely has a budget, the person I'm talking to has the authority to pull the trigger, they have a clear need that they can articulate and they want to do this in a short amount of time. I guarantee you, that's established demand. That is that is a recipe for you being at a bake off and competing on price. And what we were interested in is this idea of emerging demand or you're getting essentially further up funnel, how do I catch a customer or in the challenge or create a customer that is only just beginning to realise I need to do something different or differently because if I can catch them at the point where I need to do something different AI can begin to shape their thinking I can begin to influence the direction they go in such that by the time they get to the point where they know quote unquote, exactly what they want. It's all been deeply influenced by me. And you could do that later to come into the bake off and say I know this is what you asked for but here's what you really need. Isn't that super disruptive? And it's it's an you could get you thrown out of a meeting very quickly doing that. So so that's where whether it's you know, and again, there's parts of med pick or medic and all the others where we has

often to me has this flavour of established demand that troubles me sometimes. And I, it'd be fun to have a steel cage match with me, you know, where we debate this, you know, with another with someone who deeply believes in it, I imagine we'd find common ground, but that is the question I'd have for that person.



Jason Knight 20:17

Yeah, that is definitely an interesting one now that I want to start stoking the Holy Wars, but at the same time, maybe I should start the holy wars, it's always. So it's good to know exactly. What good radio in this case. But do you need to read the Challenger sale to get the most out of the follow up? And I guess by extension, do you need to be challenger type salesperson to build challenger customers? So is it completely different separate,

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Brent Adamson 20:40

they can build a it's like Lego blocks, right? So they can build on each other. But you can read them independently. So the Challenger customer, which by the way, the thing we call the Challenger customer in the book itself, we call it the mobilizer. We call it the Challenger customer on the cover, because the publisher asked us to kind of keep the two together, and they thought it would sell more books. They also promised us that there's no way that a sequel ever sells as much as the original and they were they were correct. And that's all. That's that's totally fine, too. But the story in challenger customer is really about who inside the are all stakeholders? So with this 5.46 point or whatever we're going to the 12 people I got to talk to inside the customer? Are they all created equal? That's first one, the answer is no, they're not all created equal. Some of them are far more valuable to others. And the ones that are valuable to you aren't necessarily the most, they're not the things we all were trained to do. Right. So we're trying to find the person who is senior most decision maker, budget owner, certain box in the org chart. And what's interesting in this book, well, I won't unpack the whole book. But when we went on study this, we found that the star performers didn't care about any of those things. What they cared about was finding someone who's good at two things driving change and building consensus. And that makes a tonne of sense. And we explore that a lot in the book, the idea that at the end, they were all kind of selling the same thing, right, which is worth selling change, I want you to stop buying this and start buying that stop buying from them start buying from us and stop doing yourself outsourcing, stop doing on prem, do it in the cloud, one or another, we're all trying to sell change. And so I need to find someone inside the organisation who will embrace that change, and then be good at building consensus around that change. And those people actually kind of hard to find and they don't fit necessarily the description you think they would. And so the challenge of customers that entire journey, so you could take the whole challenger sale and park it over here. And just look at this idea of mobilizers I think you'd find it one would find it to be super valuable.



Jason Knight 22:27

I think it's super interesting, though, because I've certainly met people in the past that are potentially mobilizers within organisations, sometimes they may also be the decision maker as well, which is a nice little mix. But yeah, sometimes they're just someone that's just in the company doing stuff. I guess the tricky part is when you're trying to sell sort of mobilizer, which

probably is, you know, you've basically spent quite a lot of time sort of talking in circles because they've actually got no authority to make the sale. Yeah, but on the other side, if you're talking to this kind of, I don't know, some kind of maverick within some organisation that's kind of coming in as a change agent of some sort and that they're also the mobilizer. They do have the budget, but actually, you get almost like a false sense of product market fit in a sense, because they're just they're spending some kind of discretionary funds on something that might or might not work, but they just want to make a splash like is that a danger when you're talking to some of these people?

B

Brent Adamson 23:15

Yeah, can't be there's all sorts of dangers when you talk to so there's there's also what we call a climber, which we're able to isolate in our research a climber is someone that was kind of what it sounds like is that they're the wisdom person what's in it for me so they will climb over top of anyone to get to where they're going. And essentially not only can you recognise them, but their colleagues recognise them for that too. So when your name gets associated with a climber inside the customer organisation, as someone said to me once their stink rubs off on you it's like this guy's talking to Jason don't talk to Jason because Bradstock and the Jason right so it was right so it's as if I see one of the things that we found about mobilizer, I think is so interesting is every time I share that many times I share the mobilizer work with people. They'll say Oh, you mean a customer champion? You need to find champions that actually well no, because that's actually a different concept. And that's a more traditional concept of again, we've been trained to find find someone who can essentially take your flag and run through the you know, figuratively run through the halls of the customer organisation waving your flag and being your champion. That's not what a mobilizer is a mobilizer isn't mobilising for you mobilizers mobilising for change. So what you need to do is give them an idea and insight this is where it does tie back to challenger by the way, an insight that is specific to their organisation not about your product or your benefits or your brand or your whatever it is. It's a an insight about their company and how they can make money, save money, mitigate risk, always am fully appreciated, and get them excited to make that change. And then attach yourself to that insight such that if they're going to achieve the best of that insight, they're gonna have to go with you. That's again, that's kind of classic challengers that your insight leads to you, not with you. But I think that's a really interesting way to think about how you prioritise your stakeholder engagement. So the customer organisation is who's going to gravitate to this insight that leads to our solution, and who's best equipped to get the rest of the company rallied around that to mobilise around the idea as opposed to rally around ourselves? shouldn't?



Jason Knight 25:00

Yeah, no, it's, again, a really big area that we could talk about for hours, no doubt. But it's definitely an interesting challenge to solve. But speaking of solving it and taking a long time to do so I mean, a lot of what we're talking about here, in the case of like education, and mobilising people, as you say, around change and trying to persuade them that there's a problem that they didn't know that I had yet again, very challenge yourself in itself. Yeah. But this idea that you've got to change the frame so that someone is there, and they maybe think something, or that they're assigned to investigate something or teach themselves something that they didn't know before. But that sounds like it's going to take quite a while, in some

cases, depending on the level of change and the level of disruption that you're introducing or the size of the problem that you're trying to get them to get into their head. Yeah. And it starts to sound a bit almost like some of the work you might have to do when you're even creating like a new category in marketing terms. Like you're sitting there trying to persuade someone that something that they didn't know existed before. Yeah, now exists, and they've got to think about it. Yeah. Now, in marketing, you can sort of sit there and say, Well, fine, you know, that's a marketing thing they can go and do that be part of their general plan. In sales. What we're talking about is a generally an organisation, which is, as you sort of touched on earlier with quotas, you know, they live by the sword die by the sword, they've got to close business every quarter, otherwise, they might get sacked. How does this kind of long game play with sales? Or is it not the sales team that does it?

B

Brent Adamson 26:22

No, it should, it should be and it can be and but I think we land on a couple of points that I think are really critical here. So that's one of the reasons why the Challenger customer has written as much for marketers as it is for sales because it's got to be a game that you play through the entire funnel, right? So do so insight starts with demand gen starts with insight, getting your customers think differently about what they're doing about their business, qualifying on their receptivity to that that insight, identifying a mobilizer as you go, so by the time you inherit them in sales, certainly you can start challenging at that point. And of course, many sales professionals all over the world do that every single day. But it can slow things down. We used to say this all the time, which is the more disruptive your insight, the more powerful can be, but also the more it can mess everything up. It's like when a customer realises like, Oh, we're thinking about this completely wrong, we got to go all the way back to the beginning and think about it all over. It's like the last last thing I want to do so. So there's right sizing your insight for disruptiveness is something to consider. There's also using this as a qualifying metric with your customers like if they are not open to that kind of rethinking. It's not that they aren't necessarily a bad customer, but they may not be a high margin customer because you're gonna wind up just going you're back in the world of established demand. And competing on price, then I think, but I think that's the critical thing here is, is figuring out how to right size, your challenge and finding the right person to move. Oh, and here's another point, because this will segue into where you want to go next. Anyway, I think Jason is um, you kind of implied it earlier. Let's say you found this person who's potentially good mobilizer. They latch on to that and said, they're really excited. They're willing to go build consensus or at least work to get consensus among their colleagues. But just because someone is willing to challenge or mobilizations is just because someone's willing to mobilise doesn't mean they're necessarily able to mobilise. And this is where I think in many ways, all of our work since then has happened. And this is how you speed up the funnel. Is, is something we at Gartner, we dubbed this idea of, we call the buyer enablement the buyer enable, essentially, based on the presumption that maybe your customer doesn't actually know how to buy, not just your solution, but a solution like yours. Who do I get involved in this? Yeah, some of someone will remember, we drew a diagram of a typical buyers journey at Gartner. And it looked like I called it the bowl of spaghetti with arrows and paragraphs. And just to like, go into there was for buying jobs, which is problem identification, solution, exploration requirements, building supplier selection, and you think if you map the typical buyer journey would just be you know, 1234, it'd be a straight line across those. But in fact, when you really map it out, you know, based on what happens in reality, it's two steps forward, one step back, three steps forward, one step back, then another step back, then you get the idea. There's arrows, and it's just a mess, right? Yeah. And so here's the, here's where I think it gets really interesting when you

when we in sales, look at the complexity of the decision making process among our customers, we tend to lament that say, oh, man, this is awful. I gotta figure out how to get them, you know. So how do I slog through this? How do I, how do I even track this? So what we do is we'll sit down, we're trained to sit down with our customer say, here's a blank piece of paper, could you just map out how this is going to work out? Who needs to get involved again, so we, we tend to lean on the customer to coach us through their purchase. When in fact, more often than not when a deal goes wrong these days? The customer like it's like it's black holes in your pipeline. It's somewhere in Gosh knows where and then the metaverse or the like, right. And it's crashed and burned, customers disappeared. And finally they call you back up and you know, like you forecasted from a month ago and it's still stuck. And they call you up and they'll start Jason. They'll start the conversation with a phrase like, it turns out that and I always joke like any sales conversation starts with the phrase it turns out thought that is like a relationship conversation starts out with the phrase we need to talk, you know, nothing good after that, right. So the, but it's always interesting. It's like it's well turns out that our procurement department needed to look this over, it turns out that our legal department wanted to have a final check. And they've got some questions. It turns out, we just hired a new compliance officer and they want to look, but But here's what's interesting to me is virtually every time your customer says it turns out that they're surprised they didn't see that coming. And yet your reaction and sales is like, Oh, God, here we go. Again. There's no one where legal gets involved. And if you flip that on its head and really think about what's going on there. Well, your customer may be getting stuck in these challenges for the very first time, you've already seen it happen multiple times because you sold similar deals to other people, or crashed and burned in similar ways in the past. Yep. So let's turn that into our advantage. What if we then took that as our assignment our role so so when we find that mobilizer, even if we don't find the mobilizer? What if our role in sales is to effectively take the customer by the hand virtually figuratively, and guide them through their buying journey. So you know, when we're in working with other customers like you as my I use that phrase all the time. And working with other customers like you, we find that procurement almost always gets involved, but it tends to get overlooked. And they usually get involved late when they do they blow things up, we'd encourage you to get them involved early. And when you do, here's the three questions you're gonna ask. And here's how you want to answer them, make sure you can continue to move forward, we've already built the PowerPoint deck that you need to have that conversation. That's Byron Allen, I think that that's where so much of our work has gone since. And it's less about frame breaking, which is all Challenger and I still stand by of course. But this is much more about frame making, how can I create a framework for my customers around decision making? And there's, there's several other frameworks one around value, one around implementation one around information, but I think these ideas are creating help you just basically chalking the pitch or chalking the field for your customer, and just helping them just, instead of asking, How do I get them to buy ask how do I help them decide? How do I simplify the decision making process? How do I simplify the massive amount of information they're consuming? How do I simplify the value calculation? How do I simplify the journey to implementation? Those are different frameworks, a framework of deciding a framework for learning a framework for value and a framework for implementation, that I think it'd be really critical for any seller trying to move a deal forward today.



Jason Knight 32:19

No, absolutely. And so obviously, a lot of the frame making stuff that you yourself refer to as the single biggest commercial opportunity today. Like, that's a bold claim. So do you genuinely think that if people cracked this, that they're going to unlock deals that were nowhere near

being unlocked before? Or do you think that it's more of an incremental thing that they can do?

B

Brent Adamson 32:38

I do that, yeah, I tend to talk in big bold strokes I realise and a half years, it comes from my old teaching days, and I have teach undergraduate 19 year olds who are either drunk or hungover from the night before and didn't want to be there. So I just, but in the case, the so here's, I think when I say it's the biggest commercial opportunity, what I mean by that the word that's implicit in there is the biggest incremental opportunity. In other words, you know, we want to compete on our product. That's, that's why there's so many product led growth companies out there today, it's really hard to compete solely on product because you wind up in a features and benefits were so and this was the case in the late 1990s to 2000. You know, a lot of very well known big fortune 500 companies were realising it became very difficult to compete on products alone have fast followers and easy copycats, things like that. So there was a broad move in the early 2000s towards what was called solution selling. So I'm not gonna sell an individual product and sell broader solution. I'm going to stitch together capabilities from m&a activity, organic growth, and say I've got the product I got the service, I got the wraparounds that then ran its course about 2010 It's still out there today, by the way, people are still competing our products they people are still competing on on solutions today. But if you think about sort of like I don't know, like FedEx and UPS, like one started with planes, one sort of a trucks and they grew their, their solutions that created in scope to the point where they're going head to head across all capabilities. And so there they've got world class solutions that are still commoditized. So the window of differentiation for product was closing, the window for differentiation of solutions was closing. That's right when challenger hit 2010 When we argued that suggested that maybe the next big opportunity for differentiation isn't so much what you sell, but how you sell it was insight, which then got picked up in the broader ether, in parallel around this idea of thought leadership. And if we could just be thought leaders and demonstrate to our customers who were the smartest people in the world, they'll come to us first. That led to the marketing automation, where that lead to but it was accompanied by marketing, automation and marketing. Content marketing is a strategy. I call this the smartness arms race of 2010 to 2020. Everybody decided to get really, really smart and spam the world with really deep insight, whether it was challenged or not. So where we are today is now customers. You know, the the smartest arms race has ended and the ties and the rates being really I would not suggest anyone they should unilaterally disarm and just go out say dumb things, right? But being really, really smart, even being really really insightful today, just as table stakes and I think this is what's so interesting about b2b is the bar for differentiation keeps moving. So when I say the single biggest opportunity to damage what I'm what I'm really getting at is, I think if you really want to stand out today, if you ask yourself, so where's the next big opportunity to differentiate? If it's not product? If it's not solution? If it's not insight, what is it? I think it's for now at least it's help. It's your ability to help your customers frame their thinking so that they can feel more confident in the decisions that they're making on behalf of their company. No, absolutely. That was a 30 year lesson in history of sales. You go and like five minutes,



Jason Knight 35:31

this is the gold, this is a gold to people come to this podcast. Well, there you go. But if I think about who does all this stuff, obviously, the sales team or in their the marketing team, or in their company leadership are going to be in there probably somewhere or hopefully in sync

with each other and marching to the same drum. Yeah, but how can the product team, the product development team, the wider team of designers and developers and the product managers that are basically responsible for building all of the stuff that the salespeople are hopefully going to go out and sell? How can we help with this frame making or indeed, any of the challenges stuff in general?

B

Brent Adamson 36:03

Well, just to be really, really provocative, I wrote an article that HBR picked up on their Digital's and put on their website back in January of 2022 is called our sales and marketing becoming obsolete, I think is the or maybe there was, I think was sales and marketing are becoming it wasn't a question I think was a statement sales and marketing are becoming obsolete. I didn't write the title for what it's worth. But But I still have I stand by it. So I'll take credit. I won't take credit for writing title. But I'll take credit for the sentiment. But not just me. But again, this is one of the last things I worked on at Gartner with a bunch of others, is that I think the best companies today, Jason. And this by the way, to all credit to Matt in his new book, The jolt effect, it's picking up on this exact same body of work the same theme, at least I should say, which is in a world where customers are overwhelmed with the complexity of their own decision making process and too much information and opaque value and doubtful implementation success, that the single biggest thing that we can do in this world is try to help our customers feel more confident in the decisions that they're making on behalf of their company. And I think that's when I put it all together. I think that's to me, what gets really interesting is because then then you can start asking, well, are our legacy structural silos, organisational silos? Sales Marketing Success service, even as value function I didn't know existed until four months ago. Are they really? Are the products your question? Are they in fact, properly positioned to make that happen? And I think the better thing to do, which is really, really hard, and it's why most people reject this outright without even engaging in it, is I think in an ideal world in the abstract, I'd start with a clean sheet of paper. This is by the way, this is what like you can tell we're like researcher, me versus sales leader in me comes out because I can talk in the abstract like this is a research, right? Yeah. But what if we were to start with a clean sheet of paper and say there is no sales, there is no marketing, there is no product. There's just an organisation that's got set of capabilities that's trying to get customers to embrace that I think what we would do is we would back solve for what are the jobs that customers are trying to complete to their satisfaction, which is all part of the jobs to be done approach from Clay Christensen and Bob Mesta, a messed up by those mo e. S TA been on the podcast. He's brilliant. He's such a great guy. By the way, Bob Menendez is a quick footnote, when you're driving your car, and you need to get you need to get gas, or whatever you might call it. There's a little arrow next to the gas gauge saying which side of the car you need to tank up on? Yep, Bob Mesta invented that arrow. That is the single most genius invention ever by human beings.



Jason Knight 38:32

Python two,

B

Brent Adamson 38:34

two. ves. certainlv it is. But the case. So this idea of iobs to be done is what if we were identifi

the five or six jobs that have to be completed the customer satisfaction, and that we organised our company around job teams. So here's the team that helps our customers complete that job. Here's the company, here's the part of our team that helps our customers complete that job. And this actually exists. So that's this article that mentions the only reason I plugged exp people might be interested in like, Okay, that sounds super hypothetical, because you're a researcher, right? But actually, this is happening at a company called SMART Technologies up in Canada. It's a it's an ed tech or educational technology company. They're brilliant. Jeff and Jen are the head of marketing and the head of sales respectively, who are no longer that marketing head of sales, because they don't have sales and marketing. They have what they call the unified commercial engine. And that the article is a story of what they've built. And they've been building I just talked to Jeff last week, and it's going gangbusters, that means it's going well it's going really strong. And they wouldn't go back in at all. And what I think is Jason is so intriguing about that story is when people hear what smarts doing, it's either I can't do that. Because we're small and they're big. And then some people say, I can't do that, because we're big and they're small. I can't do that. Because they're the number of reasons that people have found to not be able to do what smart is doing is stunning. The only one that I will buy as I can't do that because they're Canadian. That's the only one that I believe because there's something about being Canadian, that means you trust each other more. And you can do crazy stuff like that. But But I think that's so the the answer to the product team, I think is the answer to everyone which is how can we Look at an organisation, maybe we'd have to blow it all up and restructure everything, because that's incredibly disruptive. But how can we collectively and individually think about what are the jobs that customers have to complete to their satisfaction? What is my role in solving for customers confidence in their ability to complete that job that that, that one lens may change? Everything you do radically, it may just change things around the margins. But that's the right lens to apply, I would argue today.



Jason Knight 40:26

Absolutely. And that sounds like productive disruption through and through, so you're living up to your desires there. But what's next for you? Are you sticking to the day job now, I guess you only just started it. So you've probably should for a bit but is that your main plan for now or you've got another book in the offing or some other research you need to do?

B

Brent Adamson 40:43

I'll do I'll do a bunch of research for eco ecosystems, my company that I'm with now, and in fact already published a couple of smaller pieces and a nice framework, what we call a blueprint for a value based commercial operating system is very cool. Find that on our website, there may be another book someday I there's also a little side gig and some asking of some sales, kickoffs, and some keynotes that I'm doing on the side. But mostly my heart and soul now belongs to taking this company called ecosystems, which I truly believe is doing some amazing work and creating an operating system that's based on value for a commercial. So if you're going to do anything, like I talked about with smart technology, or even if you don't do it, at the very least if you can't restructure the organisation, can you at least have a software solution that serves as the proxy for that one structure? And that's what ecosystems does. So there's nothing but opportunity for us to think about sharing that story with the world and building research around it. So that's my that's my main my main gig for for the foreseeable future.



Jason Knight 41:35

So the sneaking suspicion I was being sold to they're like you're trying to turn me into a challenger customer? I



Brent Adamson 41:40

don't know you're talking about Jason.



Jason Knight 41:42

So you have got it? Did you stop that cigarette out? It'd be fine. Yeah. can people find you off the discern if they want to find out more about ecosystems about frame making challenges? Salespeople or customers? Or maybe even try and practice that, Jim?



Brent Adamson 41:56

Maybe? Yeah, what about this camera off the ice a little bit? Not as much, it's Rusty, I gotta tell you, the I'm on LinkedIn is probably the easy way to find me find the company ecosystems.us. And you can also find more information about the the customer value community, the CVC there as well. Or just send me a note, follow me on or, you know, send a connection over on LinkedIn. And I'll follow back and we'll, we'll connect there



Jason Knight 42:20

Zupa well, I'll make sure to link down into the show notes. And hopefully, you'll get some keen interest in some challenges head into your direction. Well, that's been a fantastic chat. So obviously, we're glad you could find some time in your busy schedule to help us all sell our b2b products a bit more easily and challenge our sales teams and customers. Hopefully we stay in touch but as for now, thanks for taking the time.



Brent Adamson 42:40

Thanks so much, Jason. Cheers.



Jason Knight 42:44

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to hop over to [White Knights important.com](https://whiteknightsimportant.com) Check out some of my other fantastic guests sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite podcast app and make sure you share your friends so you and make never miss another episode again. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest but as for now, thanks and good night.

