



Lessons from the Think Tank

By Denise Patrick, Senior Strategist

Understanding their stories and grasping how your products and services fit in their lives helps you tell your own story with your customer right in the middle of it.

After facilitating hundreds of Think Tanks with high growth entrepreneurs over the last 25 years, I have uncovered three fundamental issues for any business focused on increasing market share.

Issue One: Can your customers distinguish you from your competitors?

A quick search on Google will tell you how many competitors you really have. There are thousands, even millions of choices out there. Take a look at a few websites. Notice the patterns. You'll quickly notice everyone says the same thing: Customers are #1; we are your trusted partners; we offer world-class (fill in the blank) — yadda, yadda... A friend of mine calls the Internet "buckets full of buzz words." Unfortunately, that description can fit many of our websites perfectly.

The problem is: When everyone says the same thing, no one says anything.

When no one stands out, buyers have a hard time making a choice. Once you realize at least 66 percent of the B2B buying processes literally begins (and often ends) on the web, the impact of this hyper-change in buyer behavior really begins to hit you. You are losing prospects you didn't even know you had.

LESSON LEARNED: You have to give your customers MEANINGFUL reasons to choose you and that means you have to be willing to be different.

Issue Two: Do you really know your customer's story?

All of us know a lot about our own companies. We know the quality of our products, the expertise of our service-providers and we know everything about how we deliver our products and services to our customers. But what do we really know about our customers?

Data is available to give us a basic outline of our targets. But to actively influence their buying behavior, we have to fill in those outlines. Understanding their stories and grasping how your products and services fit in their lives helps you tell your own story with your customer right in the middle of it. They are the heroes of your brand narrative.

My 10-year-old granddaughter shyly asked me to tell her a "Princess" story this weekend in lieu of reading the next chapter in her current book. I've been telling her these stories since she was a toddler. She is always the hero Princess. There are always adventures and, then at a crucial point Princess must make an important choice. Of course, Princess always makes the right choice and is handsomely rewarded by her town in the end.

Your customers want to hear their own "Princess" story. What journey are they on? What tests are they facing? And how do you help them make the right choice?

Why do we leave so much money on the table? I have a theory.

LESSON LEARNED: When you help your customers make the right choice, everyone is rewarded handsomely in the end.

Issue Three: Do you know the value of what you sell? Do your customers?

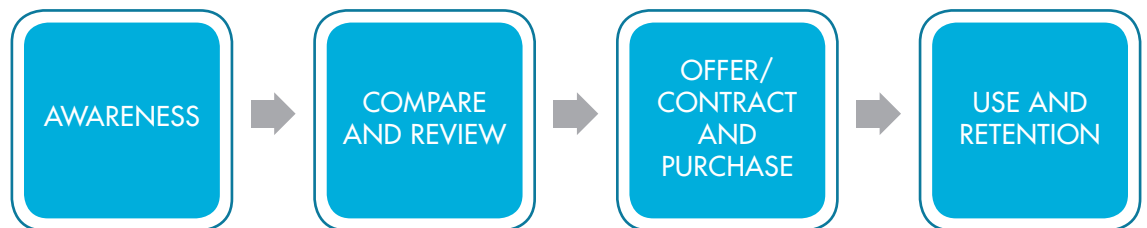
As part of the Think Tank process, we often conduct “narrative qualitative” research. In other words, we talk to your best customers to find out why and how they buy. I love these conversations and I personally have conducted thousands of depth interviews over the years. I’ve talked to customers in all types of industries — from neighborhood landscapers to some of the world’s most complex oil and gas technology companies. Here is the most consistent finding across all these interviews (drum roll): At least 80% of them told me they would have paid MORE. Sometimes a lot more.

Why do we leave so much money on the table? I have a theory. The rise of supply chain in the buying process has everyone focused on price and we (the sellers) have interpreted this behavior to mean that cost savings is the only benefit a customer values. And that assumption is false.

Finding out how your customer determines value can help you package your products and services correctly. Learn to explain the value clearly and appropriately set your price.

LESSON LEARNED: Effectively demonstrating your value across the entire buying process will not only increase your market share but also can dramatically improve your profit margins.

The bottom line is that you have to know your customers; not just the quantified version that big data supplies to you, but the innermost emotions, opinions and perceptions that drive their consumer behavior. Then, you need to take that information and incorporate it into every step of your business process.



About the Author

Denise Patrick has provided marketing and consulting services to over 2,500 firms since 1987. An expert in buyer behavior and behavioral economics, Denise works with high-growth entrepreneurs to develop the right strategies to bring their products and services to market. Denise Patrick is a senior strategist at Pierpont Communications in Houston.