



How the "inside sales department" is transforming building product manufacturers

The internal sales/customer service function at a manufacturer of building products has evolved in recent years and has become of vital importance to its success.

It is easy to forget that many things we now take for granted were not widespread only a few years ago - mainly in technology - and a large number of these have shaped our personal or professional lives and changed the way we do business - people expect more and want it instantly. We all have to adapt.

In addition, for the building and construction industry, changes to regulations and legislation have also affected the way manufacturers operate.

To help facilitate and react to these changes, the nature of the internal support office has evolved, and in a competitive climate having high quality customer service and effective internal sales teams are key to business strategy. This 'inside sales department' is transforming building product manufacturers, but how is it changing?

The need for a more sophisticated conversation

At Pinnacle Consulting, we have noticed a considerable shift in clients placing a far greater focus on the structure, nature and expectation of customer service departments.

Enhanced added value needs to be provided to customers, as does the provision of pertinent information and product support to an ever-growing number of different audiences. People expect a more informed and technical experience from their call.

A sales office was mainly focused on data input and retrieval, and passing on this information to the customer. Part numbers, list prices, delivery dates and perhaps providing a product brochure were pretty much the extent of the assistance available. A sales office was a reactive environment with little understanding of the product and the customers' requirements.



The nature of the conversation between a caller and a sales office has become more sophisticated and varied, particularly in the type of caller. The phrase 'the computer says no' pretty much sums up the way a sales or support office should not be run.

The mix of the function of person calling a sales office has shifted from being almost totally focused on distribution partners to one that on a daily basis includes installers, specifiers, contractors, developers and end-users in addition to distribution. This means that greater diversity is needed from customer service teams to adapt.

For manufacturers not to take customer service seriously is no longer an option, as these initial calls can lead to securing good business and building long-term mutually beneficial relationships.

Bringing substance to the once meaningless product code

You can see how the calibre of an internal sales person needs to be higher, although this does not mean that they need to be a part-time specification consultant - that is not their job - but it does mean they should have a basic understanding of their product and market.

This puts more responsibility on the employer to recruit either higher quality candidates or have a commitment to developing existing employees through continued training.

There now should be substance behind the characters of a part number, so that a product code becomes something tangible to internal teams.

Being able to help an enquirer at an early stage of a project and allow them to begin the process of making an informed decision gives them confidence that they are dealing with a company that wants to help and knows their market. It will also help external sales team and technical support team further down the line.

Don't forget the stockist!

It is also important that the needs of the stockist are not forgotten, they should still be one of the main focuses of a sales office environment, but the service to them also needs to be enhanced and become more proactive.

Internal teams should be actively encouraged to build closer relationships with their channel partners, as they have also changed the way they do business and the relationship they expect with their partners.

They need to be helped to understand and to sell the manufacturers products by providing relevant information, support and guidance. The sales office is ideally positioned to develop this relationship.

It should be an aim to promote cost-saving, problem-solving or regulation-driven product solutions in a straightforward and professional manner.

The whole company needs to be consistent in their approach from phone calls, visits, information and literature, to achieve this. This approach will help grow a business as well as that of its distributors.

Understanding data

However, there is still a huge emphasis on the sales office professional to provide data on stock availability, order progress, delivery dates and transport methods, and to assist with any problems that invariably occur, but it is how these problems are handled that makes a company or individual in a sales office environment excel.

Customers expect to be given facts based on actual data rather than hollow promises based on crossed fingers and supposition, although, data can also cause problems; it is vital that internal team knows not only where to access data but also understands how to interpret it. There is nothing worse than passing off something as fact when it is actually misinformation, so it is advisable to invest a great deal of time to avoid this happening. Customers should be given information they can rely on to avoid consequences throughout the distribution chain.

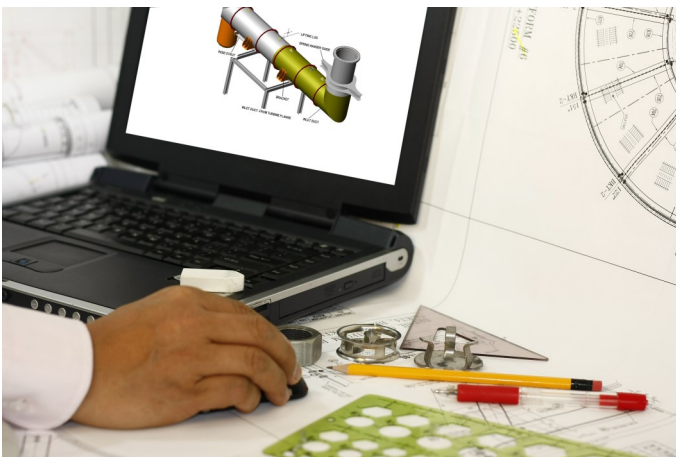
Added responsibility

Another increasingly important aspect of the internal sales/customer service professional is to actively promote new initiatives and product launches. It is important that every conversation is a possible sales/educational opportunity for the caller.

Although this does not need to become a hard sell and make the caller uncomfortable, it is a vital part of the need to build long-term relationships and share information, when it can help or reward the caller – a good policy is to make it relevant and not to waste their time.

If a manufacturer can inform an installer about a loyalty or distributor promotion scheme then they should let them know; or perhaps the manufacturer runs training courses, or has a new product that is relevant to their project or sector and it can solve a problem for them, then it is good practice to send them details.

The customer service team should be evolving so that manufacturers can help people in their job, like



offering CAD design installation design schedules service or BIM capability. Services like these are mutually beneficial and will underline confidence in the manufacturer's product.

A changing and wide-ranging skillset

The internal support professional needs to have the appropriate skillset to ask the right questions to find the right solutions, or the knowledge to give the correct answers to questions.

There is nothing worse than being passed from department to department, especially at what is likely to be an exploratory stage for the enquirer.

Teams should always be aware of the possible time restraints of the caller as they have a job to do too. So it is important to judge the situation and behave accordingly.

The internal role has become wide-ranging and needs someone who has excellent all round skills. It also now has added responsibility and a greater impact on the success or failure of any business, but particularly one in the building and construction industry.

What is needed to ensure a successful and forward thinking internal sales office at a manufacturer of building products?

Here is our five-point guide for employers to help make this change work.

1. Be consistent and educate

Although teams should be encouraged to have a personal approach, it is vital they have the information, processes and guidelines to convey a consistent message.

It isn't good practice to have people being told something different each time they call. As a result, manufacturers should invest a lot of time in ensuring its team knows their information systems, procedures and products through training and briefings.

2. Create a culture of communication and development

Much of how a business should operate needs to be based on common sense and regular effective communication throughout the business.

Try and act as one team with one voice - to achieve this departmental boundaries need to be broken down to enable understanding, so everyone works together to achieve excellent customer service.

Manufacturers should encourage active communication lines between internal and external sales, accounts, operations, marketing and technical support. Many find that if you involve people in the future of the company and listen to their views, then the company becomes more efficient and effective. It is also vital to listen and act on feedback from customers.

3. Be honest and keep promises

We are all judged by what we do, rather than what we say, and this applies to colleagues as well as customers. It is vital to have integrity and build trust as this provides the foundation for long-term business relationships.

Encourage honesty, even when it is not the news someone wants to hear. Honesty enables an issue to be resolved rather than be made worse.

4. Empower staff to be accountable

If employees can gain a good understanding of their employer's basic product system options and benefits, it's very valuable. Involving internal staff in briefings and discussions, as well as providing them with the resources to do their job, gives them the power to blossom.

That said; it is also important they know the escalation options available to them and ensure they are supported in their role.

It is advisable to set realistic KPIs and to have



regular review and role development meetings with internal staff.

5. Introduce function flexibility

Where possible try and encourage interdepartmental training, as this allows consistency in service when there are holidays or illness. It also helps to make work more varied and interesting to the employee and assists them in finding their preferred role.

The customer service function in a building products manufacturer can include order input/progress, CAD support, project planning, account management, technical support and basic sales and marketing responsibilities.

We hope you have enjoyed our feature on internal sales in the building products industry and it has given you an enhanced understanding of the vital role it has in helping companies within the industry to succeed.

Excellent office based customer service can increase sales and trust in your service or



product. An internal sales jobs is now much more specialised and rewarding due the changing nature of the role. It is not just order processing and advising on stock and prices.

Credits

Thank you to Polypipe and Neil Tilsley for their insight and input helping us to produce this article.

Polypipe design, develop and manufacture the widest range of plastic piping products, with over 20,000 product lines available. Their primary focus is on developing and supporting pragmatic product systems through specific knowledge and understanding of the residential, commercial, civils

and infrastructure market sectors.



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Further guidance

Pinnacle Consulting is a leading sales and marketing recruitment agency operating exclusively in the building products sector.

If you are an employer looking to recruit, please call us to discuss your requirements on **01480 405225** or us at email recruit@pinnacleconsulting.co.uk.

If you would like to discuss a career in Internal Sales or any role in the Building Products Industry, you may wish to attend one of our PinBuild Career Development Clinics or arrange a Skype consultation.



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