Design Thinking for Sales
10 Key Principles

Selling as your Customers are Changing

Rapelang Rabana

Introduction

It is clear to see that COVID-19 is causing havoc in every facet of our lives, and our ability to respond is being tested in the most extreme ways – from personal, to business and most specifically in the realm of sales.

However, sales are exactly what this economy needs right now and in the future, if it is to start to function normally again.

I have no doubt that you are probably reading this because you are also feeling the pinch. You feel like you are doing a million and one things to try and get back on track; you have become a video expert, shifted your messaging, changed your campaigns, and although important, these responses will only help in the immediate term.

These are tactical responses to the here and now. However, to think that this will be the only response required would be naïve at best. Combined with the impact of technology, which we were already witnessing prior to the pandemic outbreak, the impact will likely cut a lot deeper.

I think we have slacked on customer-centricity since the last 2008 financial crisis. And now the landscape has dramatically changed yet again. The ones that will survive this are those that find it within themselves to respond ably and solve customers' real problems, in the here and now.

Chapters:

1. Facts Expire

When I started my first business, Yeigo in the mid 2000's, business was simple, or so we thought. Provide people with a way to make free calls on their phone, easy. But once we had done that, we realized that people will not make that free call unless it is super convenient for them, and that brought along its own set of challenges. And, if we had to do it all again today, we would have to think about totally different challenges as the industry has completely evolved since then.

The marker of success shifts and moves constantly, and boy, does it move quickly. Especially at a time like now, thanks to the speed of innovation and economic shocks like that of COVID-19.

Digital technology allows us to get more info and see deeper into problems than ever before, as well as tracking the possible impact of our solutions (you can get data on anything now!). But the more you know, the more problems you find to solve.

The way we did things 5 years ago is no longer relevant in this day and age, and the need to unlearn and relearn as well as re-asses our facts, strategies and products is vital. Customers have changed because our world has changed.

In the space that I am in, I figure the training industry started with the simple thought that: people need to be able to do X in their job and right now they don't know how to, so let's teach them how. At that point, given the tools available, the marker of success was translated into: host as many training workshops as possible, with as many people as was practical, and provide a great facilitator to teach the topic. The trainer got paid for selling bums on seats and the client got a signed register and some certificates. Everyone must have been happy at some point. But facts expire. What was true in the past, may no longer be true at this point.

At the core of this concept of learning, unlearning, and relearning is that we must begin with a sober reassessment of the facts.

2. Start with Differentiated Thinking

In a sea of products and services that are similar – the difference is you! Investment of your time is expensive and not many do it, but it is what makes the difference. Differentiate

yourself from your competitors and be that person that is truly invested in finding a solution to the problem.

Differentiation must begin with differentiated thinking. What I say, what I do, what I write, what I create, everything that I do… is only a representation of how I think. So if I don't change my thinking, I can't change much else.

In training, the game was originally 'bums on seats' in a room – we packed people into a room to learn or upskill themselves and if the room was full, then everyone was happy. But that has changed too, and I started Rekindle Learning because when I looked at our customer problems, how cash and labour intensive the whole process was, and that learning wasn't actually even really happening, I realised that the bar needed to be higher.

Instead of building a business around bums on seats, how can we make sure that learning actually happens? How do we make learning as accessible as your social media and emails? How can we improve delivery and business performance? So, we created and built a solution around bite-sized learning modules, available on your phone.

If you do not change your thinking, you will jump on to the next technology fad, and apply the new technology to your

old thinking and the old markers of success. If your model has always been just bums on seats, you will focus on bums on seats in virtual classrooms and give a discount (how very revolutionary) – but truly what you are doing is hindering yourself from moving to the next phase by not shifting your thinking.

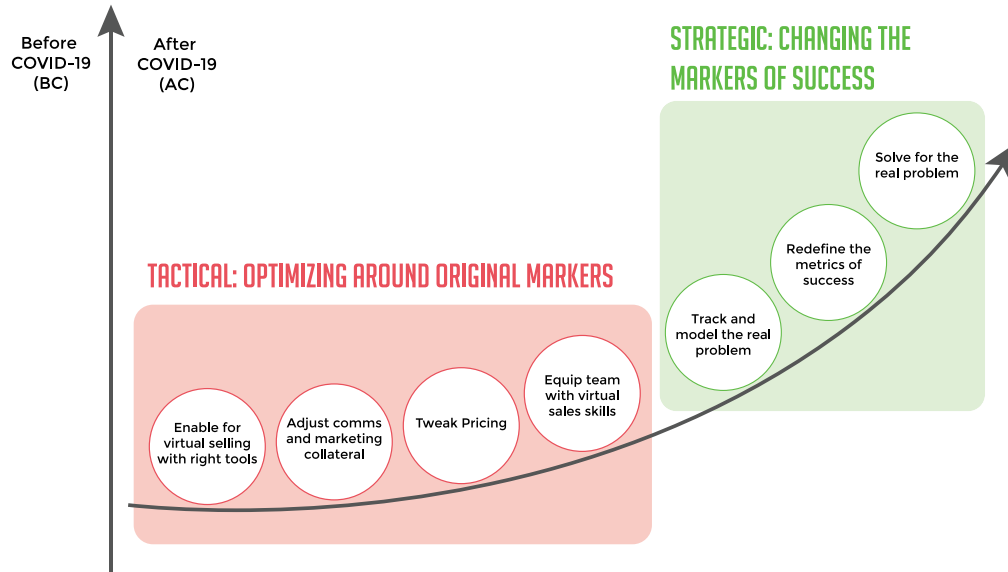## 3. Shift from a Tactical Business to a Strategic Business

What is the difference between a tactical business and a strategic business? A tactical business is 'Take what I have to sell. This is my spaza shop – please buy what I have."

To get into a different space, you cannot be thinking about 'bums on seats' – from physical classrooms to virtual classrooms, there is no change in this business model.

You need to find that shift in mind, culture and process. Do not just take your sales, the way you have always done it, and do them digitally, that defeats the process of evolving. Let's be honest, if Netflix had done that, they would still have adverts. Do you see Netflix advertising?

When I look at, for example, car dealerships petitioning to open so they can start selling and making money again (a tactical response that serves their immediate needs), I think they are missing an opportunity because of their mental blocks. I would have loved to do most of my last car buying experience online - I imagine zooming into a picture of each part of the car and

asking the questions that I am too embarrassed to ask, like how to open the engine. I would also love for the car to just arrive at my house so I can take my time to figure it out at home before getting on the road - I personally hate that first drive from the dealer to house. This may be just the right time to think of a strategic response that serves the customer.

challenges and hesitations as yours is.

If I am working with a customer to position a meaningful intervention, I know it is going to take me weeks to really understand the true problems that they are facing. Yet I cannot invest in depth if I am under pressure with my pipeline or cashflow. Having no cash is not great, but it is not your customer's problem (it's your bank's).

One cannot just throw tomatoes at your customer because that is what you need to sell right now, whether they need them or not. You need to be thinking ahead, otherwise you will take your customer backwards because of your own needs, and that is not fair.

Before COVID-19 (BC)

After COVID-19 (AC)

STRATEGIC: CHANGING THE MARKERS OF SUCCESS

Solve for the real problem

Redefine the metrics of success

TACTICAL: OPTIMIZING AROUND ORIGINAL MARKERS

Track and model the real problem

Equip team with virtual sales skills

Enable for virtual selling with right tools

Adjust comms and marketing collateral

Tweak Pricing
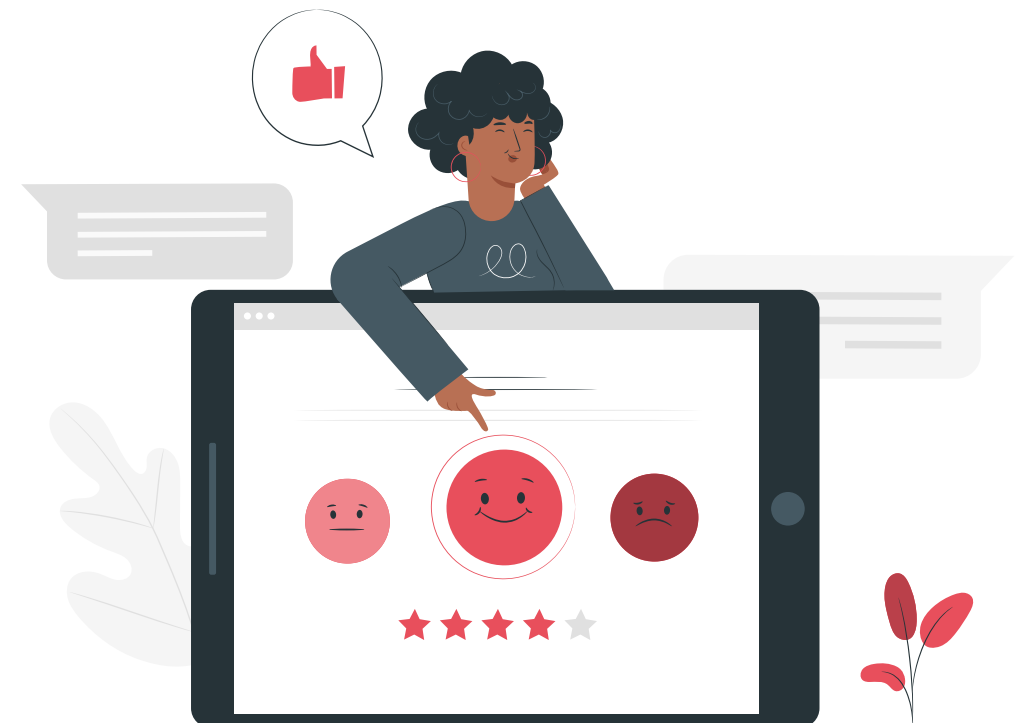
4. Focus on Depth, not Speed

The most important thing that you can do right now as a sales leader is to take the time to slow down and reflect, connect, and empathise with the customer. We often sacrifice depth for speed in a fast-paced world, and an even faster paced industry.

Truly empathize with your customer, and I do not mean empathize from an intellectual perspective, but literally look into their world, which is likely fraught with as many perceived

Part of positioning yourself and differentiating yourself is allowing yourself the opportunity to really display your competence. Realistically though, you cannot go deep on every deal, sometimes the customer can't entertain that.

Either way, you solve and then sell, by really engaging with your customer and not just selling because that is what you need. True empathy is hard work, just as relationships are hard work – that is why many people do not bother to do it.

5. Get to the Heart of the Issue

We are so busy that sometimes we are just like ducks paddling on a pond, busy feet below the water, but never looking below the surface.

Are you looking below the surface and working on the real customer problem? Do you know what your customer's true issues are, and where do you get that information from? From your customer, or from your own company and team? And, is this data really objective – have you actually validated this information? What data would you need to have that would objectively show success? The best way to get data is to ask.

We all have that one question that we need to ask, which may feel too awkward, but would cut to the core of the issue

and assist us in getting better at what we do. The time to ask that question is now. Being willing to ask and being open to investigating the difficult questions is not always pleasant, but at this time, a vital step.

Asking better questions differentiates you from your competitors.

6. Be Appropriately Vulnerable

If you find yourself in the position that you really cannot figure out what the customer's problem is, then it is best that you acknowledge that and be open and vulnerable with your customer.

Saying, 'I need time to understand this problem. Can we co-design a solution that truly adds value?' will likely get you further, and also earn your customer's respect and trust.
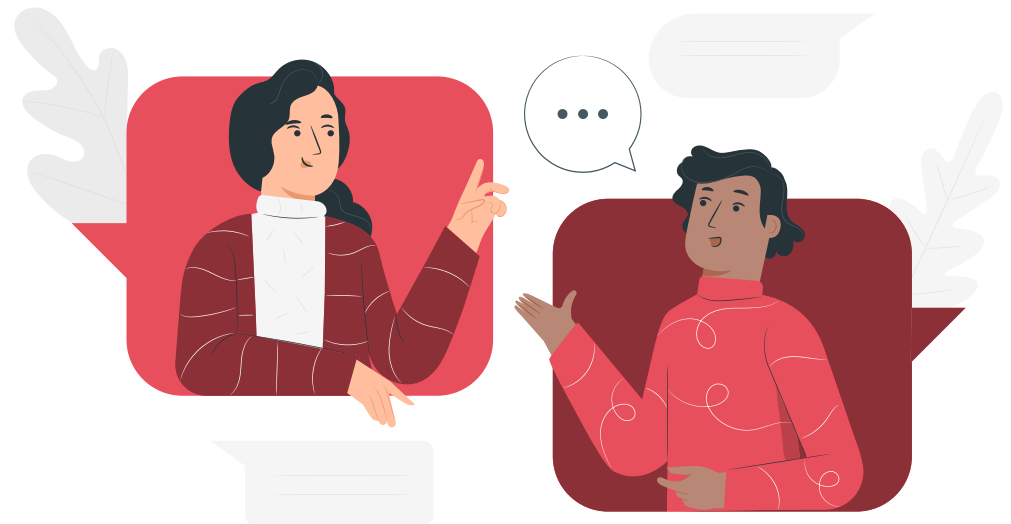
A client once asked me to develop an enablement framework because their product was quite complex and not being sold correctly, but to help them, I would realistically need to sit in at least 2 product sessions with them. In co-creation you need to spend a lot more time in discovery, sitting in internal meetings, immersing yourself and doing co-creation workshops, instead of just coming up with something because you need to make money right now.

Displaying vulnerability will encourage appropriate transparency between both parties – many companies are very transparent about their margins and find that people are happy for them to make a profit without being exploitative. It would be hypocritical to ask customers to be transparent with us if we do not reciprocate.

7. Co-design with your Customer

Part of our role can be to help the customer identify their core problem; they may not even know what that is themselves, depending on how complicated it can be.

Understand that in co-design, you will have several iterations and that your customer will need to collaborate on this. It is important that up front, you set the tone for a collaborative relationship to make it easier for both parties in the long run.

Get the customer to invest themselves in the process - once someone is invested, you do not need to push them towards the next stage, because they are co-labouring with you and want to solve the issue or find the solution as much as you do.

Ask, how might 'WE' (not I) solve or get around this and allow yourself to imagine what you can do together to find the solution.

If a customer has co-designed, they are less likely to cancel and more likely to innovate. If you co-design a house with your architect, you will not go to the architect and say the design is terrible, instead you will think of how you fix it, or another way of changing the design to something that you like and that will work for you.

The benefits of co-creating with customers, is that you have a much higher chance of closing that deal.

8. Think Bigger

In the design process, create a space to think bigger than you ever did before. Often this involves reaching a point where you need to get your head past the mental block that believes that going digital means you lose customer touchpoints and it will always be a compromise.

Rather, go into co-design believing that this could actually be better for the customer. A digital environment doesn't have to be a compromise on what you had. Allow yourself to entertain the possibility that this will be better than what you had before, how you can have many more touch points with your customer, and how you can get more data points around the customer that you can use to optimize the service.

9. Take off your Glasses, and Wear your Customer's instead

Be a user – and by that, I mean, literally think about what it is to use your own products or services. Make use of your purchasing experience and utilize your own product.

What does your customer look like? Who is your customer's customer? If you cannot easily visualise all the users in your value chain, you have also probably left a whole bunch of gaps in the customer experience.

It is totally normal to get so involved in what we are doing or selling that we forget to do this, but now is the time to stop and re-examine. Is your product relevant enough to the market and to your customers?

Remember, couples do not fall out of love, they fall out of relevance with each other. Whatever you do, do not let your customers fall out of relevance with you.

10. Stuff the Competition

Stop worrying about your competitors, they are not going to give you any money!

Trying to copy what your competitors are doing right now is not going to help. Benchmarking against your competitors is pointless, instead rather benchmark against the customer's core problem.

If I had benchmarked against what was happening in SA when I started Rekindle, we would not have pioneered micro-learning the way that we have – it was something that no one else in South Africa was doing at the time.

Your real benchmark is competing against your last best performance, in the amount of time invested, quality of questions asked, level of understanding achieved, and impact of a solution and money made.

In my software world, you are never ever done - iterative development is about continuous improvement and beating your last effort. This requires the ability to look inwards, reflect and self-correct (less about looking out there at competitors). If your model is not updating itself like software updates all the time, you are probably not relevant anymore, as harsh as that may sound.

Look back and honestly ask yourself 'what is not going so great here'. Think, reflect, and evolve around that.

Outro

Make no mistake, all of this advice is stuff you have heard before. The question is who of you will apply it and sustain the improvement. It is hard work, without a doubt. This is where the proverbial rubber hits the road and is what separates the Top 5% from the rest. There is something to be said about actualizing your visions, acting on your dreams, honouring your instincts and getting things done.

Whatever you do, do not fall into the intellectual trap of thinking that you already know this, so you are done here. Are you doing it? Actually, doing it?

About Rapelang Rabana

Featured on the cover of ForbesAfrica magazine before the age of 30, selected as a FastCompany Maverick, named Entrepreneur for the World by the World Entrepreneurship Forum and selected as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum - Rapelang is an internationally lauded technology entrepreneur. She has amassed over 15 years' experience building innovative technologies. BBusSci (Hons Comp. Sci), and M.Sc, University of Cape Town.

Rapelang does most of her work through:

Rekindle Learning

Rekindle Learning provides digital learning experiences that empower people to respond to the changing world of work. The company provides micro-learning and employee enablement to solutions. Our digital platform (mobile and web applications) enables companies to package critical organisational knowledge into interactive bite-sized learning steps you can learn on the go, and drive continuous engagement with staff. Our experience is primarily in sales, compliance, digital skills, and change management.
www.rekindlelearning.com

Everdeen

Everdeen is niche digital advisory firm that unlocks the potential of digital technologies to optimize business performance. The company works across the digital transformation spectrum - driving new revenue streams, reducing the cost to serve, enhancing the customer experience, and improving the employee experience for greater productivity. With a strong bias to action, Everdeen leverages agile design sprints to accelerate project outcomes and deliver product (not presentations).
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