Stop selling your technology! If you want to make money with tech, you need to start selling benefits, not features

Take a few minutes to think about what you're selling. The tech behind your product is probably pretty slick. But you're probably selling that technology, and that needs to change.

Understanding tech is both a blessing and a curse. Company leaders who have a solid grasp of what's fueling their product — whether it's software, hardware, hard science like chemistry, or soft science like psychology— these folks can get a concept working and into MVP quickly. But they also tend to fall into the sales trap more often than others.

It happens to new and veteran entrepreneurs and leaders alike. It happens to me all the time.

A strong tech focus can lure us to lean on our technology as the core value proposition of our product. This not only makes our sales process daunting and unproductive, it can also lead to corrective measures that produce even more painful and costly mistakes.

When an awesome tech concept stalls out

Recently, I had a session with a promising tech founder. It took me a week to understand what her company did, but once I figured it out, it checked all the right boxes.

> Her tech is outstanding and it works. Not to give anything away, but she developed software that can sit on top of other low-level software to make the other software easier to use and much less expensive for more varied use cases.

> She's in a field where the end-product is just starting to gain traction in the mainstream, and it has every reason to continue to gain traction over the next one to three years.

> The end-product is pandemic-accelerated, but it won't die off as lockdowns are lifted.

> Her solution is cross-industry, meaning her company will be more collaborative than competitive to incumbents.

> There are already a couple of large, deep-pocketed customers interested.

She came to me because she's been at this for a couple of years and it's not going anywhere. Furthermore, even though she's been actively selling the technology for long time now, she still has no idea how to price it or license it.

Why haven't you landed a sale yet?

The prospects who are already interested came to her through prior relationships, meaning they know her personally, so they happen to be in the right place at the right time.

This is one of those corrective-measure mistakes I referred to earlier, and it's a surefire symptom of the problem. Basically, she has a handful of cheerleaders on the other side of the finish line, telling her that they're in as soon as she's ready to sell.

I asked her what they were waiting for, and she rambled off a list of bug fixes, extended functionality, new features, and a host of possibilities that her tech could and probably should do — once it's a mature and robust product down the road.

But today, she's not even sure how to sell what she already has.

So my next question was — Beyond those existing prospects, whose door would you knock on next? If you could get the meeting, who would be the dream company most likely to buy on the spot?

Her answer to this question was much more confident, but much less specific. Her dream customer was anyone who needs the technology — and then she started listing off the the specs and features again.

I mean, this was me six months ago. I would have given you the same answers.

The solution to the sales problem is in the product itself

This is where the tech-led sales process usually goes off the rails, not because the messaging is wrong, not because the tech isn't finished, but because the sale itself is missing that bridge from tech to product to the buy decision.

As an example, machine learning is great tech. Everyone can benefit from this tech. But machine learning is not a product. No one buys machine learning, and in fact, quite a lot of people are negative on the concept.

So when you try to sell machine learning, beyond the initial connection of "Oh, I hear everyone talking about machine learning," there just isn't enough core value to trigger that decision to buy.

The blockchain is great tech, but the product is Bitcoin, and you can decide to buy that or not. NFTs are great tech, but the product is some C-list celebrity's tattoo.

You can decide to buy that product or not.

Are you selling bitcoin or a celebrity tattoo?

This is more than a sales exercise. The lack of product is one of the reasons tech entrepreneurs dread the sales process and either do it poorly for a long time or try to partner up with some kind sales guru who can produce a different result.

This doesn't work, because no matter how good the salesperson is, if you send them out to sell tech, they will fail.

And it's more than a marketing exercise. Trying to market technology is just as pointless as selling it.

So while the concepts of good sales and good marketing are important, defining and positioning the product is the horse that needs to come before that cart.

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Ask yourself what you're selling again

Let's revisit the question I asked at the top of the post. And this time I'll use the example of the tech founder from our recent session.

What are the benefits of your tech?

This could be a lot of things, but it all boils down to time, money, access, and quality. Does your tech make a new thing possible? Does it make an existing thing cheaper? Does it make an existing task take less time?

At one of the startups I advise, they use machine learning to create a decision tree that uses longview metrics to measure the value of a big spend. Yeah, that's mouthful, so it's "Buy better things more quickly."

In our software example from above, we decided the number one benefit was making an existing thing more accessible to a greater number of use cases by making it easier to use and cheaper to implement. The benefit is "Add this new revenue stream now."

Where do those benefits provide the most bang for the buck?

Or where is the lowest hanging fruit? Kind of related to choosing that dream company who would buy immediately. Yes, your tech can benefit everyone, but who can it benefit the most, today, as it is?

At Get Spiffy, we built our entire mobile, on-demand tech to accommodate car washes and oil changes, not because of the tech, but because we knew that niche market of mobile, on-demand services would provide the most value with more customers, most easily.

In our example, those new use cases for the tech, while probably the most difficult to sell *from a technical perspective*, are also likely the ones who would benefit the most from that tech. She was so worried about having to explain the tech to these new potential customers, she didn't realize they were the least likely to care about the tech during their buy decision.

How do we position the product?

Ultimately, you want to build the product around the best product-market fit. You'll only know for sure where that is when your product hits the market, so develop a product that gives your tech the best chance at finding that fit.

When I said I make this mistake this all the time, I just did it with Teaching Startup. The tech could have positioned the product as a really light-footprint eLearning product, or it could have positioned the product as a really "quiet" social network. From the perspective of where the customer finds value, it's neither.

In our example, her tech is screaming to be positioned as Software as a Service, but the core value isn't like traditional SaaS. It's more of a straight service. Once we got there, it made the most sense to find a new market and sell our way up to the bigger fish, the bigger fish being those customer prospects who were waiting for her to get to the finish line.

Which is probably why they'd been waiting so long. She was trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, and it was both maddening and frightening.

Once you've answered these questions, you might find you've been doing sales wrong all along, and it's time to pivot your approach. The corrective measure mistakes that you want to avoid usually occur when the tech founder tries to adapt the tech to be all things to all people, rather than using that tech to power a product that customers will buy.

This article was originally published on Medium by Joe Procopio

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