



Digitising the sales process for professional services

Bob Pethick, PwC

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the way all of us buy goods and services—regardless of whether we're talking about B2C or B2B services. In fact, one could argue that professional services firms have had to deal with even more drastic changes to the way they sell than most B2C businesses. In the world of professional services, sales have always been highly relationship-driven; many providers therefore assumed that the pace of digitisation would remain relatively slow, as clients would still expect a high level of in-person interaction throughout the sales process.

The pandemic turned that on its head. Virtually overnight, firms found themselves needing to learn how to sell more effectively in a virtual environment; many looked to lessons from other sectors for how to manage a customer journey with a much more significant digital component. To understand how one firm tackled this challenge, and ensured it had access to the skills and technology necessary to sell effectively in this environment, we spoke to **Bob Pethick**, the Global Advisory Clients and Market Leader at PwC.

Overall, how different is the experience of selling professional services today compared to before the pandemic? What's changed, and what's remained the same?

Looking at the sales process for professional services, I'd say that there are a number of dimensions where change has taken place due to COVID. For one thing, the issues that clients are dealing with are different. Most clients right now are in a position where they have to prioritise their short-term needs over their longer-term ambitions. That means that we aren't seeing as many complex multi-year transformation deals as we used to. Instead, engagements tend to be shorter, and clients are more interested in working in an agile way. Consequently, anyone selling consulting engagements now has to work harder to stay on top of a rapidly changing set of client needs.

The topics that clients care about have changed a great deal over the course of the pandemic, as the nature of the crisis itself has changed. First, people were most concerned about how to protect the health of their employees; after that, they started to worry about the finances of their organisations and the debt they were taking on; and now, they're at a point where they're starting to think about longer-term questions of how to interact with customers and grow their businesses in a more virtual environment. So consulting firms have had to keep pace with those changes, and ensure that they were reflected in the thought leadership they were putting out into the market and the content they were putting in front of clients.

One of the most notable changes over the past year has been the fact that we now get to spend much less face time with clients than we used to. That presents an obvious challenge: How do you continue to provide a differentiated experience through the sales process in this more virtual environment? My experience has been that, in that kind of environment, sales become a bit less personality-driven and a bit more content-driven. When you're interacting through a videoconference, it can be harder to convey your personality and command the room in the way you could if you were presenting in a boardroom, so instead, you have to lean more heavily on the content, the ideas, and the thought leadership you're bringing to the table.



Have those changes had an impact on the types of firms that clients are most likely to want to buy from?

Right now, clients don't seem to have the same readiness to entertain new professional services relationships that they once did; over the past 12 months, work has tended to go to the firms clients already have an established, trusted relationship with. That means that firms have to think differently about how they maximise the value of those relationships. It's not feasible any more to try to sell the same services to many different clients; instead, firms are incentivised to think about how they can provide a greater depth and breadth of services to their existing client base.

And have you noticed any changes over the past year in terms of the kind of stakeholders you have to interact with while selling a piece of work, and the level at which decisions get made in client organisations?

For a while now, consulting budgets have been gravitating to more senior decision-makers. That hasn't changed during the pandemic; if anything, the trend has probably accelerated. With clients having to become more cost-conscious because of COVID, they're applying a greater level of scrutiny to those spending decisions. And in many cases, they're having to make those decisions on a much faster timeline, meaning that senior leaders don't have time to delegate, and instead have to take a much more hands-on approach to managing consulting spend.

Do you see this shift away from in-person interactions as part of a broader trend towards the digitisation of selling and buying professional services?

All commerce has shifted online over the past few years, and consulting certainly isn't immune to that trend. Clients might not be making purchases through the internet, but they are relying more on the internet for locating answers to questions, finding insights and shopping for the best expertise and service capabilities online, and finding information about firms they might want to work with. The challenge for firms is to find ways to demonstrate a responsiveness to their clients' online behaviour: How do you provide effective follow-up to people who have particular questions or needs? How do you analyse click patterns on your website to figure out what your clients' priorities are? How do you

use your online presence as a bridge into individualised conversations between prospective clients and your consultants? Fifteen years ago, there was a lot of scepticism that consulting services would ever be engaged in such a digital way, but now they are, and firms need to adapt to this new reality.

What do firms like PwC need to do in order to ensure they're able to provide that kind of highly individualised customer experience in a more digital world?

The challenge of bridging the gap between the online and offline sales experience has both a technology component and a cultural one to it. Yes, you have to have a CRM platform capable of capturing the right data points about your customers' online behaviour. But how you then act on that data is a behavioural and cultural question. It's important to strike the right balance of putting interesting and relevant content in front of clients, but without going overboard and becoming a nuisance; there are some firms out there where as soon as you download a single report from their website, you find yourself on 100 different mailing lists you have to manually unsubscribe from.

It will probably be a while before consulting firms routinely make use of customer data in the same way or to the same extent that businesses in the B2C space do. That said, there are things that firms can do to be more targeted and more data-driven in the way they engage with their customers. But it's not as simple as saying, 'this customer was looking at this page, so they're going to be interested in this solution'; you don't want to come across as a hawk of gadgets and widgets. Instead, it's about developing a more holistic understanding of your clients and the challenges they're facing—so that you can present yourself as a partner who can help them achieve the outcomes they're looking for.

So, what sort of behavioural changes have you made at PwC to ensure that when you do get in front of a client—physically or virtually—you're able to maximise the value of that time?

It isn't just the selling and the upfront scoping of a project that have changed because of COVID; almost all project delivery is now being done remotely. That means that firms have to use the sales process to give

clients a taste of what it will be like to work with them in that kind of remote environment. When we sell to clients, we don't just tell them about all of the tools we've incorporated into our delivery model in order to facilitate remote work; we bring those tools to life. For example, we use our meetings with the client to show them how we run remote workshops, how we capture feedback after a session, and so on.

Our 'Business Experience Technology' (or 'BXT') approach is central to the way we deliver consulting services at PwC these days; it's all about how you make consulting outcomes real for stakeholders in a day-to-day working environment, and how you ensure that the outcomes you achieve are measurable not just on the balance sheet but also for individuals within the client organisation. Consulting, in our view, has historically revolved too much around the B and the T, with not enough focus on the X—on how you bring ideas to life through prototypes, what-if analyses, and demonstrators, all the way from the start of the sales process through to the final deliverables. Translating that experience aspect into a virtual environment has been particularly challenging. Fortunately, at PwC we'd already started investing in digitising our sales and delivery processes prior to the pandemic, so for us, it was mostly a case of sharpening the point of the spear and accelerating adoption of the tools and platforms we already had access to.

Do you think that these changes have had an impact on the type of skill profile required to be a successful salesperson in the world of professional services?

For the most part, the skills required to be a successful salesperson haven't changed as a result of the pandemic. It's still about being a good listener, having a breadth of experience to draw on, and having the gravitas necessary to put ideas on the

table in the right way. What has changed is how you get to that table in the first place. You don't have access to the same sort of casual interactions and chance encounters with clients that you once did—and that means that you have to make a really solid first impression if you want to build a new client relationship. The aim for anyone selling consulting services should be to leave every client interaction having delivered value in some way. If you've got an hour with a potential new client on Zoom, you can't afford to just sit there while they outline a problem statement and then go back to them later with a proposal; you have to use that time to raise questions they hadn't thought of themselves, or help them see the problem in a new and interesting way.

Looking ahead to the future, how do you expect the sales process and the nature of consultant/client relationships to continue to evolve over the next five years?

In the future, I think that consulting/client relationships will be a hybrid of remote and in-person interactions. Clients and firms will be keen to maintain the benefits of remote working; I certainly don't think that clients will want to go back to subsidising the travel of consultants in the way they used to. And I think that there'll still be interest in the kind of '24-hour delivery' model that remote working can enable, once you start joining the dots between different offices worldwide. So a lot of research, analysis, and strategy tasks will probably continue to be delivered remotely. But consultants will also have the flexibility to spend more time on site with their clients when they're doing work that requires a more hands-on approach; I'm thinking here about a lot of change management work, or tasks where you need to get everyone around the same table and aligned on a new direction. Technology work will sit at both ends of the spectrum; it will depend a lot on the exact nature of the work, and the maturity of the client's own internal capabilities.



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