

Marketing technology to SMEs: Top 5 messages you need to communicate

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Excerpt

SMEs' adoption of business technology is varied. Given their unique profile of not having a team of specialised IT professionals, they buy IT solutions when triggered by business necessity. And even then, they will explore various cost-effective offerings before making a purchase decision. This article discusses 5 common buying criteria in an SME's shopping list, and why marketers need to address them.

Taking the conventional definition, SMEs are local companies with less than 200 employees. Given that range, and the diverse industries they operate in, each SMEs' taste for technology can equally be varied. A simple assumption to make is that few SMEs can afford to have a full IT department. Furthermore, most business PC users in this environment do not get up-to-date IT training. In a study conducted by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SCCCI) in 2004, they found that 70% of SMEs don't adopt IT fast enough because employees are not adequately trained. Although the study is dated, the sheer size will not change overnight. Effective marketing to this segment logically requires that we segment the group further, and promote specific solutions to a targeted audience. However, there are some tried and tested messages that must prevail in all communications. These are the top 5:

1. Connect to business value
2. Demonstrate ease of use
3. Use case studies to make it real
4. Financially easy to acquire
5. Peace of mind with technical support

1. Benefits connected to increasing sales (or lowering costs)

SMEs buy technology to meet a specific business need. In the same SCCCI study, 87% of SME respondents believe IT is the approach to address their business challenges. When you highlight a feature, link it to immediate business returns. SMEs understand things in the context of their immediate business world. If you can demonstrate how using Microsoft PowerPoint to create a persuasive presentation, folks in sales roles generally understand that. If you can put a value to important company documents – and position Acronis backup as an insurance, most people in the office can appreciate the time and effort (and even dollars) saved.

I would caution against promising long-term gains (such as 3-year Return on Investment ROI that bigger enterprise favour). SMEs are typically pressured by short term business goals. So, aligning to their immediate objectives will position your offerings more favourably.

2. Keep it simple – to understand and to use

Try to distil the benefits of your solution to 3 top selling points, tailored to the profile of your SME audience. If they are predominantly users of technology, focus on how it gets the job done more conveniently. To business managers, you will have to show how your products can contribute to their companies' bottom line. This segment typically does not have IT background (or the time to understand it), so your messages have to be crisp, relevant, and more importantly, simple to understand.

SMEs don't want to buy a white elephant (they have gotten their fingers burnt before). If you show a great feature, make sure that it is easy to reproduce when SMEs get back to their desks. One simple way is to provide a step-by-step instruction, either in your presentation notes, in trial CDs or even online over webinars. When customers take your product home for evaluation, make sure

that the “taken-for-granted” reviewer guide provides instructions to expose the beneficial bells and whistles.

Another popular tactic is to link to the familiarity with existing technology (e.g. Microsoft Office). For example, Microsoft Dynamics CRM allows SMEs to access the customer data from the ever-present Microsoft Outlook email tool.

3. Case studies focusing on particular roles or industry

A simple marketing tool to produce, case studies help SMEs identify with a profiled customer who has used a IT solution and have benefited from it. Customer stories make your solution and its promises real. Besides drawing the reader into the environment of another company (preferably in the same industry), the customer evidence guides SMEs as they project where they can get to.

You may have heard the popular phrase that we only use 20% of the all the features in an IT solution. But which 20% does each of us individually use? A salesperson email and word processor tools for client-related matters; the Finance department relies a lot more of spreadsheets and formulas to crunch their work. By appealing to work scenarios of SMEs, decision-makers will be able to relate how their own people can use the new IT solutions. Selling general benefits to everyone in the office does not appeal in our modern technology age.

4. Easy to acquire and finance

So you’re on the shortlist of technology SMEs want to buy. One of the constant roadblocks is the cost of acquiring technology. Local enterprises typically worry about monthly cashflow. If you don’t have pricing plans for SMEs, arrange for flexible financing terms so that an otherwise expensive (usually anything above S\$1,000) decision can made promptly and positively. One of my favourite is Hitachi Capital. When I worked with them, they made it very convenient to set up financing arrangements to supplement my promotions. In your marketing messages, this can be a strong value proposition.

5. Avenue for support

SMEs have every reason to be sceptical about implementing new technology, even if you’re spouting words like “reliability” in your brochures. After all, as users of technology ourselves, we have experienced technical difficulties from time to time. Making the experience worse was having no access to someone who knows how to fix them. Since SMEs don’t have in-house technical support, talk up your post-sales services (or your network of partners’) as early as possible. Explain the convenience of your implementation and technical support, and set expectations early if there costs involved. Acknowledge that technical mishaps can and do happen, and more importantly, walk your SME customers through your process of seeking a solution.

SMEs have pressing short term business goals to meet. They turn to technology to help achieve those goals. As they look to the market for solutions, they are bombarded with a myriad of technospeak. Many technology firms lose out when they don’t have specific messages for SMEs. To appeal to this segment, you need to be sensitive to, and address the unique technology challenges of SMEs.

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