

All.Net Analyst Report and Newsletter

Welcome to our Analyst Report and Newsletter

Claims v. Reality in Cyber Security Sales

Those of us who have seen this movie before are still occasionally amazed by the ability of companies to present total BS as a breakthrough. As if we could not tell shit from shinola. But apparently some customers still buy it. Or at least they are willing to go far enough further to actually find out what the heck the companies are talking about.

Sales and marketing is all lies anyway!

No it's not. But sometimes sales and marketing goes too far or says things that experts know cannot be true. It sets off the BS alarm and spoils the waters for any hope of a path forward for buyers. This is not the fault of sales and marketing folks, unless they are in fact experts in the cyber-security field (or sales and marketing in it).

Properly done, cyber-security presented to customers tells a truthful story of how the customer can benefit from the product or service. Just like any other service or product. Bring value to the customer without leaving lingering questions in their mind of the veracity of your claims.

Some hints

Some specific examples are always helpful. The following are select actual quotes (or near quotes) from sales and marketing efforts from actual cyber-security companies (*with commentary*)

- The NSA couldn't break it and approved it for use at X
 - *First off, the NSA would not be telling you if it could (or could not) break something. Vulnerabilities in systems are generally considered classified by such agencies if (1) they protect anything classified or (2) they can be used against a potential adversary. If they came to this conclusion and told you then you could not tell me or the general public. So it's just plain BS.*
 - *Secondly, if the NSA approved it for use somewhere else, it is probably because they figured they knew how to break into it, because the NSA is in the business of gathering intelligence. The part of the NSA responsible for protecting systems is unlikely to have access to the part tasked with attacking them.*
 - *Third, even if the NSA could not break it (whatever that means), it doesn't mean that someone else cannot break it. Put enough weight on it and it will be broken.*
 - *Finally, there is no real system that cannot be exploited in some way. Which brings us to our next ridiculous claim.*
- It cannot be broken (and variations thereof – like it does anything perfectly)
 - *Yes it can be broken, no it's not perfect. Stop making the claim even if you believe it to be true. Be a bit humble, and don't assume you know more about it than your customer – or the analyst – or me.*

- *How much are you willing to bet on it? I have asked this to lots of folks who have made that claim, and the usual response is something like \$10,000. So my conclusion is that you can trust it for up to \$10,000 of negative consequence. Higher consequence, they won't put at stake.*
- Others have lost (fear) and so could you (uncertainty), so you should buy this
 - *The first problem I see in these presentations is that they all seem to provide statistics that likely differ from the direct experience of the customer. There is no win here:*
 - *If you tell them something they already know, you are wasting their time. At best you convince them that you know what they know about the issue, which is good for establishing rapport, but not for showing you know more than they do.*
 - *If you tell them something less than their experience, they will think you don't know the reality. Why buy from someone who doesn't even know the reality?*
 - *If you tell them something more than their experience, they will figure you are exaggerating or using figures from someone who doesn't really know. Same issue.*
 - *If they are thinking of buying this from you, they already know why they are discussing it with you, and your additional information may cause them to find you less believable.*
 - *Second problem, fear does not sell. Resolution of fear does.*
 - *If they are not afraid, trying to make them afraid is more likely to cause them to fear you than to like you.*
 - *If they are already afraid, making them more afraid is likely to set off a fight/flight response, neither of which you want in order to make a sale.*
 - *Third problem, the conclusion (you should buy this) does not follow from being afraid of something else.*
 - *The missing step is resolution of the fear, but you don't need to tell them to be afraid in order to resolve their fears.*

We have a lot more of these, but this should get you started.

Inconsistency and hyperbole

The next big problem is inconsistency. If it seems inconsistent and they don't ask, you cannot fix it. So they will assume you are lying (salespeople always lie – right?) and you will lose credibility. Here are some recent examples:

- We have 15 current customers, the average sale price is \$50K/ea, and we had revenues of \$120K last year.
 - $15 * \$50K = \$750K \gg \$120K \rightarrow$ *Something is not right*
- The hedge is another good one... 120 Fortune 500 companies are currently using our technology.

- *To be clear, more than 75% of all the general purpose computers and 99% of all cellular devices in the world are using my technology (the technology I first came up with in the 1980s – integrity checking), but nobody is paying me royalties on it and they didn't buy it from me.*
- Anything with the word “lead” (e.g., we are world-leading..., we are leaders in the field of..., etc.)
 - *The leading provider of anything might have no sales, no customers, and no anything of use. I am the world leader in automated analysis of standards of practice for cyber-security. Of course nobody else I am aware of is trying to do this particular thing.*

And then there is the inevitable and my favorite thing to hate...

The pissing contest

I hate the part of the security sale where I have to prove that I know more than your expert about something. Unfortunately, this seems to happen almost all the time. It's largely about ego I think, but I am tired of trying to explain to folks how my attack will work against their system after they claim perfection. So please stop it.

- *In a recent meeting with the CEO and some top technologists from a company in the 10s of millions of annual revenue, the technologists was reasonable in almost every way. But the CEO made the mistake of bragging. I explained that there is no perfect system and that I could probably come up with 50 ways to defeat their systems in an hour, so naturally he asked me to prove it. In about 5 minutes I pointed out 5 ways to exploit their systems, all of which the technologist agreed would work. The CEO kept telling them to take notes, and for the last one asked how I would counter the attack. I explained that they cannot. It's inherent in the technology they are using. He kept asking for more, so I told him if they hire us we will tell them the other 45.*

I explained that having weaknesses is not avoidable and not particularly relevant to selling their products to their customers. But they are still considering allowing us to help them.

So what is relevant?

I explained what every sales person knows (I am not really a sales person, but I play one for my businesses till we get real sales people). People buy things to make their lives better.

- *It's not the features – it's the benefits – to the person you are communicating with.*

If you cannot recognize the difference (features/benefits), you should hire me! You'll sell more!

Conclusions

I'm sure you, my readers, will come up with more similar things to tell me about, and I will be happy to add the good ones to the article with your permission at my editorial discretion.

It's not really the list that's the important thing to take away from this article anyway. It's the frustration of the buyers and knowledgeable folks with the utter ridiculousness of the sales process in cybersecurity. As a personal favor to me, could you please start with something I recognize as worthwhile to me in the first 10 seconds? And if I don't want/need it, let me tell you so, so you can move on to a customer who might actually want it, buy it, and pay you!