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# Combative, Confrontational or Constructive

Which one are you?

BY LINDA WOLSTENCROFT

There are three C's in Defence Marketing in regard to customer approach: *Combative*, *Confrontational* and *Constructive*.

The combative approach is just as it sounds: It's combat. It's warfare. It's going to war with your customer. It's essentially threatening your customer. It's telling the customer that they are wrong, they are bad, and that bad things will happen if they don't listen to you. It reveals itself publicly and privately when you discredit them. In the defence business, many people have served in or supported combat operations so this stance feels natural to them.

In fact, in many organizations, customers are talked about as if they were the enemy – fierce enemies whose actions are seen as cruel, and any adverse business decisions made are seen as being specifically intended to impart hurt. The customers are blamed for carefully considering what the competitors have to offer.

Combat is heard in the boardrooms, felt in the hallways, and heard in the whispers from the staff. At the top, the message is that there is a battle: It is "us" versus "them," and if "they" don't give us what "we" deserve, then they are simply wrong. Internally, the combative warfare stance is honoured as a show of strength. And, while it is indeed a show of strength, it is also bad for business.

A company using this approach can sail along waging its war for a while, but the result is often the eventual loss of significant work or the customer simply selects a different solution from a competitor.

The *confrontational* approach is a softer, less severe, and more reasonable approach that uses conflict rather than combat. What's

the difference? The customer is not seen as the enemy, but as a bolster to the company's success. Therefore, in this approach, as long as the customer supports the company's success, all is well; but if there's a change, this leads to confrontation.

“It's time to be constructive and not obstructive.”

An example of this is the firm that superficially honours its customers, but in the backrooms devises ways to orient the customer differently. This may lead to actions that are misleading or dishonest. From a customer's perspective, this approach is confusing because there is contradictory performance. The result is a broken trust bond.

The final approach, *constructive*, is one in which honesty and a win-win atmosphere prevails. This is the best approach over the other options of combative or confrontational. Why? Because (1) clearly doing business in a combative fashion is counter-productive, and (2) customers can usually see through a company who is confrontational and will eventually stop trusting them.

Today, when project consultations are more common, it's time to be constructive and not obstructive. In the past, contenders have brought up issues without providing alternative options to meet their customer's goals. Very few were constructive, believing customers have not thought things through or simply wanting to change the customer's mind to suit their own objectives. Being

obstructive instead of constructive only serves to stall an already very slow process.

Why is it important to be specific in choosing your approach?

Consciously or unconsciously, this important decision of *combative*, *confrontational* or *constructive* is made at the top and will permeate through the entire organization. The approach chosen will then be evident in the attitudes of front-line customer-facing people, on the company's website, and on its social media presence. It will also show itself in proposals and marketing messages. Indeed, this is an important decision.

Of course, establishing an approach at the top is easier said than done. This is because even at the top, views on the approach may vary. In a recent meeting, the head of an organization spoke of his customer in a combative way by using statements such as, "I've gone up against. . ." and "I've fought this for years. . ." etc.

And, while the organization offers a valuable solution, the customer has remained unconvinced, largely in part because the staff becomes energized into battle by the self-aggrandized heroics of the leader. However, given the chance to consider this, the smarter people in the room may begin to question whether this approach will yield the desired outcome. Is it possible that their lack of success is partly due to this combative stance? What's your attitude?

Combative: "The customer is the enemy."

Confrontational: "We are entitled to have our customer support our success."

Constructive: "The customer is sophisticated and smart, has value to add, and working together we can achieve a better result for all."

So, what's your company's approach?

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