

WHITE PAPER

Using content to create connections among people

Keeping the sales force up to date

Shawn Callahan
shawn@anecdote.com.au

anecdote
complexity . narrative . knowledge

A new solution for an old problem

Sales forces face a perennial problem—how to keep sales folk up to date with relevant know-how without burdening them with tasks such as searching through complicated database systems. This white paper describes a potential approach to this sort of problem, and then discusses how the approach might work in practice.

The key players in this solution are salespeople, the technical-support people (sometimes called ‘presales’, ‘technicians’, or ‘technical sales’) who advise clients and salespeople on issues of technical implementation, and sales-marketing folk who provide salespeople with sales tools.

Steps in the solution

First step: technicians' blog

The first step in this solution is to get all the technical-support people to maintain a blog about anything that might be of interest to their fellow technicians or to the sales force—what they perceive in the market, what products they are using, what actually works (and what is ‘marketecture’), what is happening at client sites, and what they are hearing about competitors. These blogs are on the company’s intranet and therefore can only be seen by employees of the

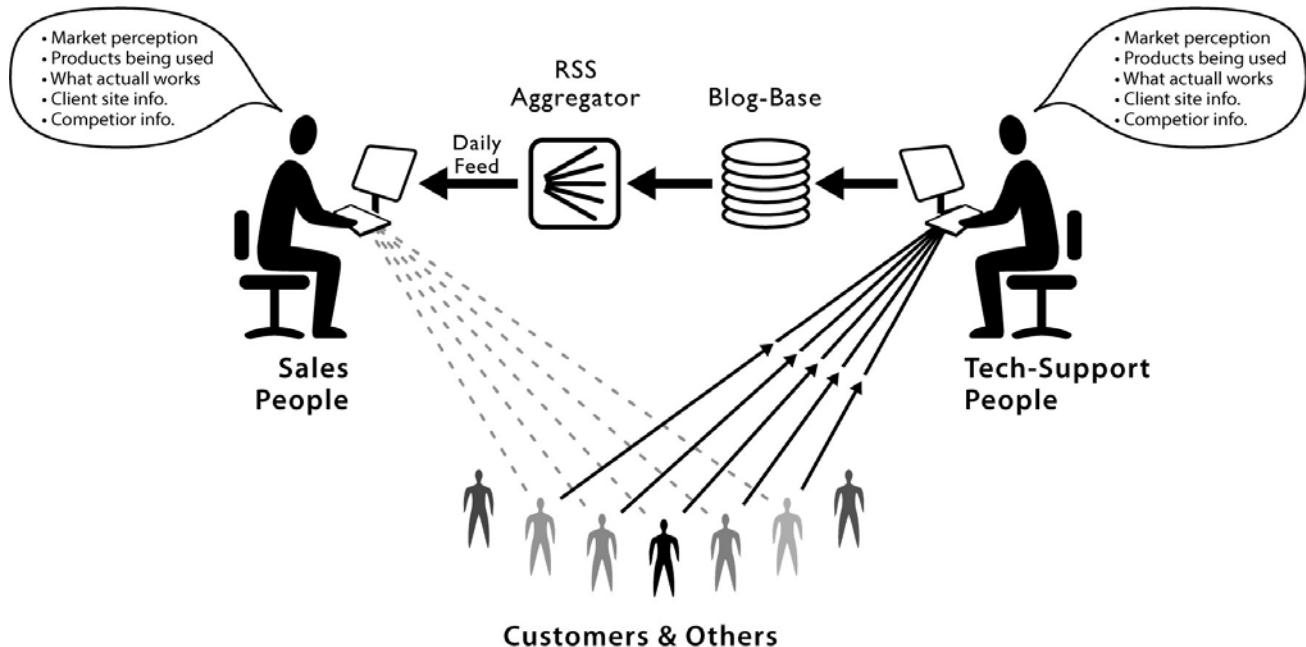
company.

The online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, defines a blog (which is short for ‘web log’) as ‘a type of web application which contains periodic posts on a common webpage’. For example, a technician might post a message describing a product glitch that occurs only when it is integrated with a particular version of another product and, on the following day, post another message about a rumour that a competitor is planning a seminar a week before their annual trade show. The size of each blog post can vary from one liners to multi-page essays. A typical blog post is about two paragraphs.

Second step: accessing the blog

The next step is to give every salesperson an RSS aggregator so they can all subscribe to the technicians’ blogs. Using an aggregator is like visiting a personal news page to which all preferred news sources are piped directly. The salesperson can add blogs at any time so it’s really customised to their interests.

By using their aggregators, the salespeople will be able to see the title and an excerpt of each post on the selected technicians’ blog. A quick look at the aggregator each morning will give the salespeople an indication of what is happening in their sales environment from a product



perspective—with the information coming directly from the people who actually know and care about product issues.

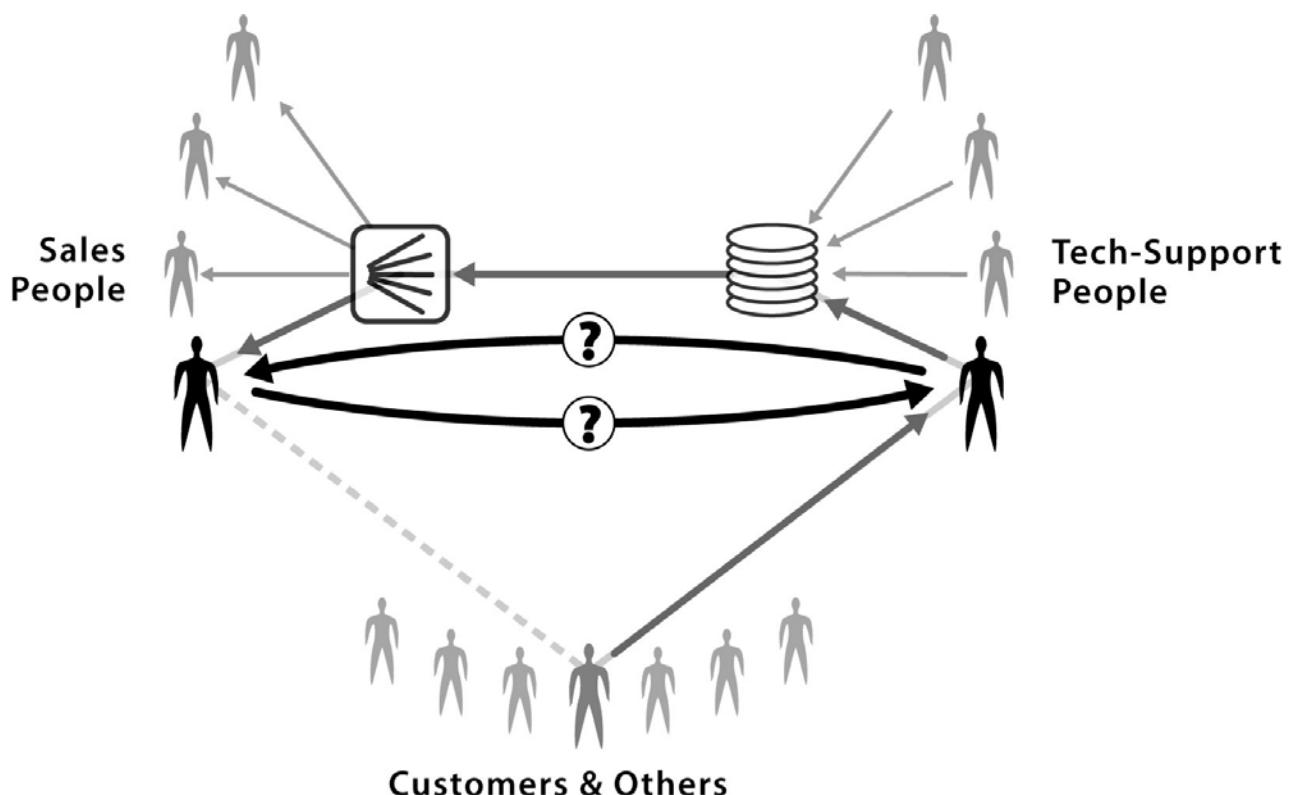
The real power of this solution

The first two steps create *content* that is useful to both the salespeople and the presales folk. However, the *real power* in this solution comes from the one-on-one interaction fostered by the approach. For example, a salesman might need to know whether a product can be implemented in a specific configuration. If he has noticed that Kelly has often mentioned this product in her blogs, but has never said anything about configurations, the salesman can call Kelly and ask her about his requirement. The *real power* of this solution is generated when Kelly responds to his enquiry by *asking him questions*—so a more relevant answer

knowledge base will identify either nothing or a huge number of documents. Most of them will be useless—powerpoint presentations with no meaningful context; or perhaps marketing brochures that rarely describe what actually happens in a real implementation; or perhaps 30-page reports that the salesperson has neither the time nor inclination to read. Faced with this mountain of useless information, the salesperson is likely to ‘wing-it’ and hope everything will work out—reasoning that, if things do not go well, he or she will have been paid a commission before the solution begins to unravel.

Extending the solution to others

The solution advocated here can be extended by adding additional bloggers to the mix—such as the sales-marketing team. These contributors can post



or a better contact can be provided. In fact, Kelly might also provide a direct link to a document directly relevant to the salesman's need. We could call this process, ‘social indexing’.

The value of this approach can be appreciated if it is contrasted with a typical best-practice database. A salesperson who searches the

blogs about solution selling or about the latest marketing campaign, and each post can be linked to the brochures, guidebooks, and other material required to support the selling process.

Taken together, these shared blogs will spark interest and awareness among the sales force.

Benefits and advantages

This approach produces a multitude of benefits, and has several advantages over other approaches. These include:

- increased agility in the sales force;
- a simple and inexpensive solution; and
- harnessing community cultures within the organisation.

Increased agility

The blogs encourage a wider set of relationships among the salesforce and the presales team. By increasing the connections within the social network, the sales organisation becomes more agile. More avenues of investigation become available for developing solutions as a result of the extensive connections established through myriad small question-and-answer sessions among salespeople and technicians.

Simple and inexpensive

The solution described here is simple and inexpensive. High-quality blogging software is already available in some organisations, or can be purchased for relatively little cost. The same is true of RSS aggregators. If organisations wish to add the capability to search all the blogs, commercial software is probably advisable—but many organisations already have this capability as part of their IT infrastructure.

The simple and inexpensive nature of this solution means that major software vendors would never advise large sales organisations to adopt this approach—because sales value for the vendor would be small. Organisations are therefore still being sold complicated and expensive systems (which are difficult to implement)—even though this much simpler and much less expensive solution is now available.

Harnessing community cultures

In addition to its simplicity and economy, this approach harnesses the respective cultures of the sales and presales communities.

In the *sales community*, salespeople avoid accessing complicated databases—it wastes large amounts of their time by keeping them away from their primary task of selling to clients. Rather, this approach relies on their becoming aware of what is

happening through a simple application interface which is much like reading the newspaper each morning, and then asking follow-up questions on the telephone—the natural habitat of a sales professional. Over time, salespeople begin to identify which presales people are working in their areas. As they get to know these presales people better, salespeople recognise who among them have deep or broad knowledge and who are making themselves available to assist salespeople by sharing what they know.

In the *technical community*, a major challenge for this solution is convincing the technicians to initiate and maintain their blogs. The best blogs are updated daily, and achieving this might be a significant change management challenge. Nevertheless, there are a couple of factors working in favour of the change. First, technical staff tend to be comfortable with new technologies such as blogging (although it must be remembered that comfort with technology is an insufficient enabler for its consistent use). Secondly, technical folk like to share what they know and, if they are confident that their efforts will be recognised and supported by senior sales management, they are more likely to adopt blogging with enthusiasm than other groups in an organisation. Despite these favourable factors, the effort must be useful to technicians as a community—that is, it must help them to solve their pressing day-to-day issues. The initiative will not survive unless it meets this requirement for the technical community. Anecdote's expertise in cultivating communities of practice is relevant in this context—but that is another, much larger, topic.

Experience has shown that blogs are ideal for supporting technical communities—indeed, the Internet is brimming with examples (such as 'dotnetjunkies'). Many blogs, including the present author's blog, include a list of community members (called a 'blogroll'). The value of the technicians' efforts will increase as individuals learn to cross-reference and comment on the efforts and ideas of others. Over time, a collaborative body of knowledge will emerge—both on the page and through the stories that are told about how things really work. However, although this content is important, the approach described here plays a more important role in *connecting people*—thus proving invaluable assistance as they tackle the

seemingly intractable problems faced by a sales force every day.

About the Author

Shawn Callahan is director of Anecdote Pty Ltd, a consulting firm based in Melbourne, Australia. Shawn specialises in helping organisations harness their informal knowledge. If you have comments or questions about this paper, please contact Shawn at shawn@anecdote.com.au

If you would like to receive future Anecdote white papers, visit the Anecdote website at <http://www.anecdote.com.au> and subscribe to the newsletter.