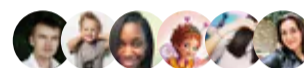# 5 Lessons We Learned Selling Unsexy Software (Like Hotcakes)

BY ANASTASIA MAZUR   6 MIN READ

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"If your coffee order is more than four words, you are part of the problem."

Have you ever tried explaining unsexy tech? It is not the task for the faint of heart.

If your coffee order is more than four words, you are part of the problem. The software we make rarely fits in this word count in terms of titles. Usually, the explanation is longer, containing monsters like "replicator", "extractor" and "stubbing." Try explaining their purpose, and you will often be met with effort and confusion.

That is unsexy tech: applications that are hard to grasp for non-experts. Apps which solve specific issues for other software. Apps which are usually not for the end user, but for those who take care of them.

The opposite of this – sexy tech – naturally receives more exposure in media: apps that belong in consumer's smartphones are easy to understand and relate to.

If explaining the product is difficult, selling it is even worse. Yet, when your business depends on it, you have no choice. Each piece of advice here is a result of a tough learning process we've had over the years doing just that.

Who are we anyways?

I work in PR at <u>Connecting Software</u>, a producer of integration and synchronization solutions. Our target users are IT administrators, developers, system integrators, and consultants.

The company started modestly, with the natural constraints of a self-financed firm from a small European country. Today, we sell our apps to governments and large international corporations. But the road to success was bumpy, so we are here to share some of our findings:

1. The market is not always ready to accept your solution, but you need to find its one feature that sells.

Sometimes, the market is not ready for your ground-breaking solutions, especially if you are playing out of your league.

In 2011, we launched Connect Bridge – a platform for software integration to Exchange server.

The platform was good, but to our frustration, we didn't get a chance to prove its worth. Nobody believed a small IT firm was capable of it. It was a king's class, and we were out of rank.

Our team tried to pitch the solution to various decision makers until we finally got a conversation with Technology Solutions Professionals of Microsoft Austria. They told us (and I'm paraphrasing): *If your platform is so powerful, why don't you solve a big security issue like the Dynamics CRM and SharePoint integration environment?* (Dynamics CRM and SharePoint missed permissions and privileges synchronization — aka restricted data could get into wrong hands in SharePoint).

Our developers checked the software, made a proof of concept and launched the first version in four months. It was fast because we built it using our own platform. In four more months, we had the first customer for the Dynamics CRM to SharePoint Permission Replicator. Shortly after, we became the global market leaders in this small niche. It is still one of our most successful products.

2. Listen to your customer.

It is very rare that customers have only one problem with software: usually there are several pain points in the same area. As our CB Permissions Replicator was getting more features and usability, we would become more familiar with other clients' headaches. Turns out, there are various nagging issues around CRM systems, SharePoint, Exchange server and other business software that cry out for easy integration.

So, we became a suite of solutions for Microsoft business-related needs and received Microsoft Gold and Silver competencies.

Takeaway: If you are attentive to your client's complaints – even not directly related to your product — it opens up more business opportunities.

3. Turn your product into your salesperson.

A marketing strategy depends on the resources you have and the market you deal with. Are you good at sales? Are you good at engineering?

In the beginning, the situation was desperate: we knew our product was great, but we could not scale it up because we had little sales power. Firstly, because Central Europe has never been famous for its talent pool of salespeople. And secondly, because competing with salability of venture capitalists and huge companies from the U.S. and Britain was next to impossible.

We invested in several salespeople, but nothing worked. A person who both understood all the complexity of software integration and sold well was hard to find.

So, we accepted the failure and changed our marketing strategy.

Now our salesperson was the product.

Instead of going out to the world, we welcomed the world on our website.

We focused on content, putting more effort into our SEO ranking. For us, this has been more effective and cheaper than traditional sales. It's also helped keep the product price down.

4. Don't sell the product. Sell the trial.

We never shout "buy our stuff!" Instead, we say "try our product." All of our marketing efforts aim at convincing a person to install a trial version for free and see if it covers their needs.

Building trust is easier when people can experiment with your product. They lose the fear of working with an unknown company from a different country (or even a different continent). And after a trial, they better understand how much effort it took to become more open to paying a fair price.

Making your product easy to deploy, run and maintain will also help. If the need arises, our experts train folks how to use the product for free. This sees good results: if a client treated the trial seriously, verified its capacity for 2-3 days, we close 80 percent of deals.

5. Locals know better.

Big corporations often outsource their IT system management to external consultants. Build connections and turn them into your partners. Local players can have a better understanding of customers' needs and may offer your solution before the customer finds out it exists. Through a local partner, we managed to close one of the most successful deals with the Department of Justice in Canada.

In conclusion

In my opinion, selling unsexy B2B software is much more complicated than marketing easy apps for end users. So — if you are in this business — know there is a lot of work to do. But the future is exciting and I wish you success with your complicated, but very important, software.
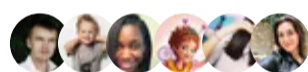
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