

## Online Sales Tools: The Relationship Manager's Best Friend

Today's banking customers are faced with a problem of plenty. They are pursued by a number of competing financial institutions, all of them fighting for share of wallet. The decision process is further confounded by the variety of products on offer. Customers must choose between products that are largely similar, but subtly different.

When conditions are uncertain and finances under strain, customers are understandably more cautious about where they'd like to park their money. That makes the job of relationship managers even more challenging – they must recommend the right solution for their customer and maximise business for their bank. In order to establish credibility beyond doubt, they must be equipped with the right tools that can demonstrate the veracity of their recommendations. These tools must be versatile enough to help relationship managers meet each of the following challenges:

➤ **Being part of customers' consideration set:**

With so many players vying for attention, capturing mind-share is a battle in itself. Arguably, the ones that differentiate themselves the fastest stand to win this round. Sales automation and financial simulation tools can help banks establish their "wow factor" provided they are geared in a way such that:

- **They speak the customers' language.**  
While the tools must impress customers, they must not overwhelm them. Therefore, they must be designed keeping the customers' perspective at the forefront. "What do they need to know? What are their prime concerns? What terms do they understand?" Relevance and simplicity are prerequisites for the success of any financial tool.
- **They are designed to help customers understand.**  
Most customers will not buy-in unless they have a clear understanding of what they're getting into. Therefore, it is in the banks' interest to facilitate easy comprehension of their proposition. When the relationship

manager recommends a certain product, he must be able to back it up with a rock-solid argument. For instance, if the advice is to go in for a home loan, he must have a way to demonstrate how monthly loan repayment makes better long-term economic sense than rental expenditure. That means he must replicate on the spot, a real-life scenario based on the customers' eligibility criteria, financial strength and prevalent interest rates to arrive at the Equated Monthly Instalment (EMI) burden they will have to bear.

➤ **They are visually engaging.**

Visual representation of financial scenarios is like a first handshake, which can either make or mar the relationship. Spreadsheets and tables must therefore make way for more modern tools. The user interface must have a clean and intuitive layout, and be visually consistent with the banks' corporate branding. It must also be rich in graphics and self-help features. Look and feel, more than anything else, will help create that much sought after wow factor.

➤ **Communicating value proposition of banks' products:**

Most people understand simple financial products. However, when multiple features get bundled into a single offering, they may have difficulty comprehending all its nuances. As products become increasingly sophisticated, the need to elucidate their features and benefits becomes more critical.

Financial simulation tools come in handy as they can help relationship managers do the following:

- **Present accurate demonstrations.**  
Complex product features are immediately demystified when illustrated through an example. A customer in need of liquidity may not instinctively know whether a new personal loan is a better option than refinancing an existing mortgage. However, if he is able to simulate each scenario with the help of a financial calculator, the answer will be self-evident.

➤ **Create personalised illustrations.**

A customer must be able to quickly relate to any solution being proposed by the financial adviser. Therefore it is essential that the illustrations are populated with data specific to him, and the results are instantly visible. As the customer is drawn into the argument, he must be encouraged to try out the tools himself. This also increases his involvement in the decision making process.

➤ **Identifying the right product(s) for each customer:**

Every bank has a number of products in its armoury, including those originated by third parties. However, different products often fulfil similar objectives, for example, building long term savings, mitigating risk or protecting capital. This puts the financial adviser in the delicate position of having to ensure that he helps his clients zero in on that product which is best suited to their needs.

So, while the adviser may have established the superiority of his offerings vis-à-vis the competition, he must now distil that communication to propose a specific solution. Search and selection tools prove invaluable in this situation as they help users eliminate those products which are clearly irrelevant or unsuitable. Once a short-list is generated, the results can be further refined by applying filter criteria. Another useful feature of a robust tool is its ability to arrange products in accordance with customer-specified criteria, such as cost, tenure, pay-back and so on.

Again, most customers expect their financial adviser to guide them on a portfolio of debt and savings products. Therefore, the tools that empower relationship managers must be versatile, with the capability to handle credit cards, mutual funds, insurance products etc., in addition to basic banking products such as deposits and loans.

➤ **Empowering customers to take the right decision:**

It is necessary that the selection tool not only facilitates evaluation of different products, but also enables comparison of the various options available within a single product. For example, a prospective house owner can decide on whether he should apply for a fixed interest mortgage or go with a plan based on tiered rates.

In other words, the tool must be able to propose a set of specific and unequivocal solutions, customised to the end-user, and not merely provide generic, high-level recommendations.

When the customer is thus empowered with full knowledge of the implications of the products on the short-list, he is in the right position to take a decision. It is to be expected that a decision taken on the basis of clear reasoning will yield good results.

➤ **Maintaining consistency of product messages:**

The job of promoting an array of complex products to a large number of customers can be quite demanding. How can relationship managers ensure that they cover all bases during each customer interaction? How can banks ensure that all their representatives present a product in exactly the same way? How can they keep the product message from getting diluted, or worse, misrepresented?

The use of financial tools brings about uniformity in product communication. Since they facilitate product demonstration on the basis of objective criteria, they minimise the risk of subjective inaccuracies or personal opinions creeping into the message.

It is equally important to maintain the consistency of the communication all through the product life-cycle. Therefore, once an adviser has successfully sold a product to his customer, he must continue to deploy the relevant tools during ongoing reviews to illustrate the product's performance. These interactions also open up opportunities to up-sell or cross-sell to the same customer.

Since banking products and services are now delivered across a range of channels, the same product messaging must appear on all of them. Therefore, the tools (and underlying data) must be centrally located so that they are accessible from the branch, online or by other methods. This also ensures that updates are carried uniformly across all channels simultaneously.

➤ **Maintaining accuracy of representation:**

There's a great deal of fine print associated with complex financial offerings. Understandably, it is difficult for someone to accurately recall from memory the terms and conditions associated with each product. Inadvertent omission or misrepresentation during a product presentation to a customer could lead to serious legal consequences for banks.

The usage of financial tools mitigates this risk. Product limits, applicable ratios and other conditions can be built-in, eliminating the need for relationship managers to keep track of them manually. Other checks and balances can also be introduced in order to ensure that the products are compliant with current regulations. Moreover, since the tools can be maintained centrally, compliance and accuracy of representation are assured across all channels of delivery.

**Other Value-additions**

Before finalising the choice of financial tools, the procuring bank must ensure that the selected application is capable of fulfilling all the above objectives. Not all tools are alike. Those offered by leading vendors pack more power and include several functionalities such as:

- The ability to include bank or product specific features and terminology
- The ability to incorporate individual bank branding elements into the visuals
- The flexibility to integrate with multiple applications in use by the bank – including those at the front and back-end

- The capability to add new calculators and modellers quickly
- The versatility to handle multiple currencies and languages, so necessary for a bank with international operations
- The ability to extend the scope of coverage to include reward program points, telephone payment plans and other interesting offers
- The freedom to mix and match tools as per the bank's specific needs

**Relevant all through Prospecting-to-Conversion**

Having made the right selection, banks must encourage and train their staff to take full advantage of the tools at their disposal. Their usage need not be restricted to product presentation – they can be deployed throughout the sales cycle from prospecting to origination.

Once a prospective customer has searched, refined and selected a financial product and a quotation has been made, the information can be captured and fed into the bank's system. Those records can be accessed at the time of origination across all banking channels, whether online or offline, thereby facilitating a quick closure of the deal.

**An Invaluable Aid to Relationship Managers**

Being simple yet versatile, finance tools are high on appeal. Importantly, they do more than merely enable relationship managers to put up a fine product display and present an impressive image of their banks. By imparting extra authenticity to the executives' recommendations, they fortify the customers' faith in the banks and their representatives. That is as powerful a differentiator as any.

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