SPS COMMERCE
INFINITE RETAIL POWER™

POINT OF SALE DATA SHARING

THE NEW STANDARD FOR THE RETAIL SUPPLY CHAIN

Retailers are counting on suppliers to understand and help manage their own products' performance at the store level. To enable this, an increasing number of retailers provide Point of Sale (POS) data to vendors so that these vendors can perform their own analysis and help retailers make better decisions.

Current low-cost offerings from enterprise cloud EDI providers can be set up quickly, and help suppliers develop strategies to share with their retailers for the betterment of their mutual business efforts. The low cost of entry and short learning curve make these systems low-risk, but high-reward ways of building a long-term relationship that transforms the supplier from an order taker to a business partner.

This white paper examines the tools available, and the reasons why suppliers should understand and implement these systems now to grow their business relationship with retail customers.

SPS COMMERCE, INC.

P. 612-435-9400
333 South 7th St., Suite 1000
Minneapolis, MN 55402

spscommerce.com

INTRODUCTION

The continual push to maximize profits has taken its toll on the retail industry and those companies that supply it. These pressures have forced many companies, particularly retailers, to look in directions that are different from those they traditionally used to increase margins and reduce costs. Traditional approaches relied on looking internally for ways to either expand their markets or do a better job in their current markets. But these efforts have been pursued to the point that retailers are now as efficient as they can be.

FIRST STEPS
INTERNAL INITIATIVES

CUT INVENTORY
REDUCE HEADCOUNT
REDUCE VENDOR COUNTS
STOP OPENING STORES
AUTOMATE SUPPLY CHAIN

Retailers can only improve fill rates, on-time delivery and inventory levels so much by streamlining operations internally and extracting consequences from suppliers when they perform poorly. This has traditionally been a one-way dialog, but at some point, it needs to become a cooperative effort where both sides have incentives to work together in a win/win scenario.

This change in focus has led retailers to look externally for solutions. For many large retailers, this change toward a more outward-looking approach to margin maximization has made a significant positive difference that has benefited both large and small suppliers.

NEXT STEPS
EXTERNAL INITIATIVES

SHARE SALES DATA
SCORECARD VENDORS
SHIFT/SHARE RESPONSIBILITY WITH VENDORS
IMPROVE PLANNING AND FORECASTING

New technologies and processes strengthen the retailer-supplier partnership, enabling both parties to make the most of their joint sales channel. This approach makes a lot of sense. The concept of cooperation between retailer and supplier means both have the opportunity to understand not only the goals of their trading partners, but also the actual performance of the products they are jointly marketing.

Leading retailers have been providing sales data as POS transactions for years. Many retailers have implemented collaborative programs in which they share store-level sales data, inventory data, and margin information. This data is a prerequisite to initiating collaborative dialogs. These efforts have resulted in much more strategic relationships over time, which are good for both the retailer and the vendor.

In the past, systems required to analyze point-of-sale data were complex and expensive, often costing millions of dollars. These systems were generally used only by large suppliers.

- Hardware: $100k – $1m+
- Database Software: $100k - $1m+
- ETL Software: $100k - $1m+
- Business Intelligence Software: $100k - $1m+
- Consulting: $100k - $1m+
- Implementation Time: 6 – 18 Months
- Ongoing Support: $100k - $500k
- All Paid For Upfront

The systems these retailers built to support these relationships were expensive. They required the development of historical, time-series, multi-dimensional data warehouses that store and transform operational data. In addition, since these were pioneering efforts, business intelligence tools were required so that merchants and vendors could analyze and navigate through the data without having to understand the internal structures and complexities. Often these projects had price tags well into the millions of dollars.

Recently, three trends have emerged, causing those pioneering retailers to expand the use of these tools to more, and in some cases, ALL of their vendors. The movement is also opening up to new retailers that want to implement these projects for the first time. These three trends are:

- The cloud model has dramatically lowered the bar in terms of cost, risk, and time required to implement these solutions for both the retailer and supplier. These immediately accessible solutions make it possible to be up and running in a matter of days or weeks with little or no upfront investment and small monthly fees.

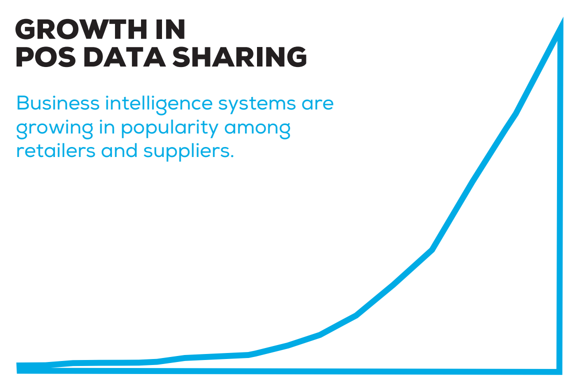
- The competitive pressure to keep costs down is forcing larger retailers to make information available to more vendors than ever before. Retailers that have not been active in these efforts are considering launching similar programs.

- The reduction in the retailer's merchandising staff is forcing them to push more of the burden of maintaining inventory to their vendors. If they are not completely transferring the responsibility, they want to have additional eyes and ears monitoring their products' performance as a necessity of operating the business.

Like the large companies before, smaller suppliers now need to learn how to use this information and these tools to effectively work with their buyers. For many suppliers, this is no longer an option, but an expectation from retailers, and a competitive necessity just to keep up with the competition. Suppliers that don't step up to the challenge will be relegated to the bottom rung of vendors a given retailer works with. And in the worst cases, will lose their customers and go out of business.

GROWTH IN POS DATA SHARING

Business intelligence systems are growing in popularity among retailers and suppliers.



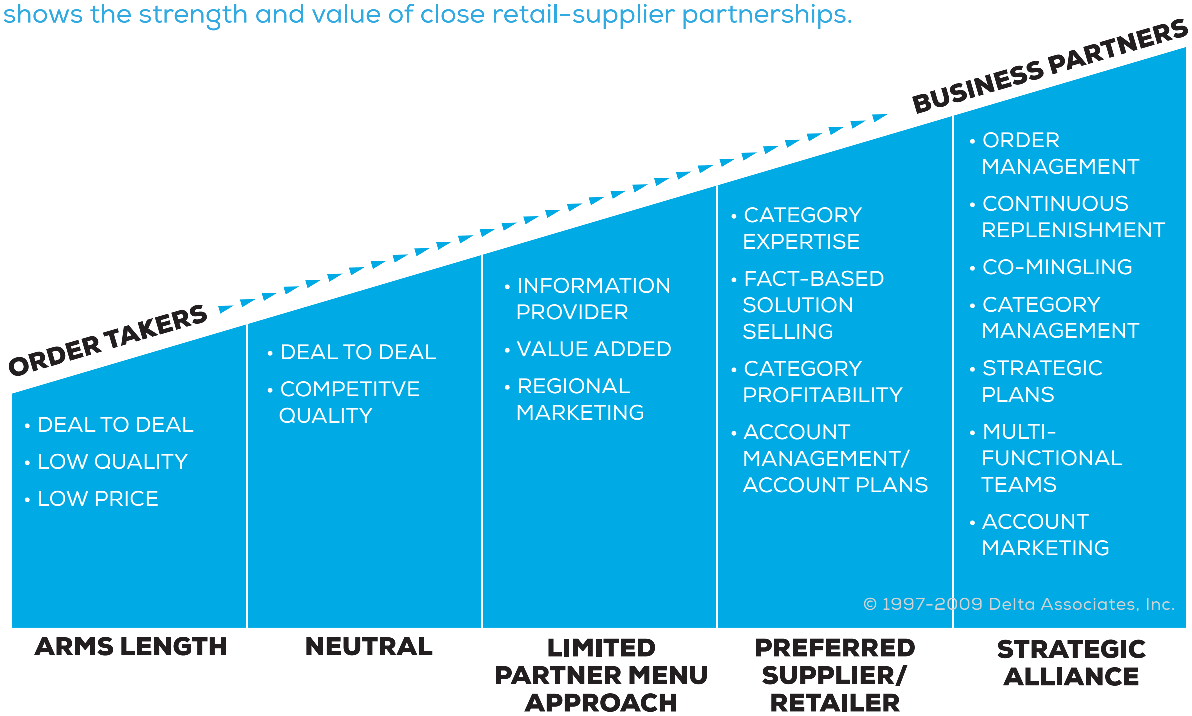
SUPPLIER HIERARCHY

The biggest challenge facing suppliers is no longer the expense of implementing POS analytics tools, but rather the shift in thinking about how to manage customer relationships. Retailers are no longer interested in dealing with the victim mentality that many suppliers have taken up over the years. Rather, many have realized that they can no longer keep track of the thousands or hundreds of thousands of products they sell, and are expecting suppliers to do their share.

Retailers are driven to seek help in determining which products are performing, underperforming, or becoming runaway successes; and putting the right efforts in place to properly position each item to maximize its potential. Simply stated, retailers understand that they are unable to be the best advocates for every product they carry. At the same time, they know that their suppliers have the most at stake in making certain their own products are properly positioned.

Whether they are being driven by forward-thinking collaboration or just the reality of fewer staff merchants to manage the business, these retailers know that while they can't do the detail work themselves, they can make the tools and data available to their suppliers. Vendors will serve themselves well by understanding the types of relationships merchants have with their vendors.

The Delta Associates Business Relationship Continuum diagram shows the strength and value of close retail-supplier partnerships.



The Delta Associates Business Relationship Continuum diagram is a good tool to use to assess the relationship between a supplier and its retail customer. It shows that there is a significant difference between suppliers that are simply Order Takers and those acting as Business Partners with their customers. Suppliers on the lower end of the scale, that have only arms-length relationships with their customers and compete primarily on price, are the first vendors to be let go as retailers reduce their number of trading partners.

The corresponding trend continues to show the strength and value of partnering between suppliers and their customers. Suppliers that assist their customers with strategic plans, product mix recommendations, and order management have stronger ties to the success of their retail customers. And the retailers understand the value being added. The strength of the relationship shows up in increased product sales and margins.

These dynamics represent both threats and opportunities to suppliers competing for a diminishing number of relationships. Retailers are looking for vendors to take the lead more than ever, and those that seize the opportunity will move up the ladder and receive the benefits that go with it. Those that don't manage and strengthen their relationships will struggle to remain relevant, and will find it increasingly difficult to grow existing business. The spiral is likely to become even steeper as these suppliers attempt to gain new business from the retailers that are making this change.

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

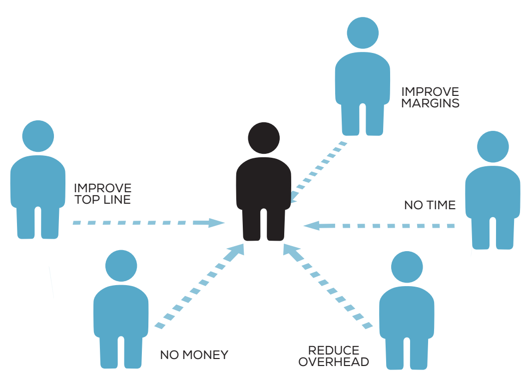
Suppliers that are already engaged with their retailer customers and using the POS data provided by their retail partners are moving up the ladder in their business relationships.

These retailers have built the tools they know suppliers can leverage to contribute to their joint success. At this point, it's up to vendors to go on the offensive, and take control of what's been made available. Whether retailers have an overwhelming desire to collaborate, or they simply want to rely more heavily on their vendors to do the work previously done by their own merchandising staff, they

FACED WITH AN ARRAY OF PRESSURES,

BUYERS RELY ON THEIR VENDORS TO PROACTIVELY ADVISE THEM ON

HOW TO DRIVE SALES AND REDUCE INVENTORY



just want the work to be done so that their sales can reach the desired levels. The message from these retailers is, "Don't wait. Just start using the tools, and get good at it."

It's easy to understand why retailers are in this position. Imagine the world of the typical buyer for a retail chain. They have hundreds of stores and hundreds of vendors, amounting to thousands of products. They don't have the time or the incentive to watch the performance of each item. And they certainly don't have any intention to become more involved in the success of a product than the supplier does.

Fortunately, it's easy to really perk up a buyer's ears if the vendor can quickly show them how to drive more sales or reduce inventory, particularly if they can show them how to accomplish this without doing more work or spending more money. So, it's the supplier's job to make it easy for them. It wasn't always easy, or even possible to accomplish these tasks. But now that retailers are handing suppliers the tools, it's incumbent, and even expected that they will take the lead and help their own products perform as best they possibly can.

Here are three examples of where to start and what to do:

1. **Use the data ›** Feed the planning and inventory system with retailers' sales data. If suppliers apply this data properly, they can improve fill rates and on-time delivery simply by knowing the products' actual performance. And be sure to highlight that performance to the buyer. In addition to improving sales performance and looking good to the buyers, this kind of proactive approach should help save money.

2. **Take ownership of the products' success ›** Watch how products are performing at the store level. When a supplier sees a potential stock out or overage, point it out. Even if their contacts don't immediately take their advice, after they see that the vendor actually does know what they are talking about, they will appreciate the recommendation.

3. **Look smart and proactive!** The competition is already taking advantage of this kind of intelligence. There is no reason to walk into the next buyer's meeting with anything less than a complete run-down on how the products are performing. Using this kind of information, the supplier can be better prepared to discuss their own performance than the buyer is. Suppliers must prove that they have the information and the plan that the buyer needs, and that they've already been putting it to use for the betterment of the retailer, their products, and joint margin success.

   Refer to the stair-step diagram to see how these kinds of actions can help to move the relationship up the ladder, and change a vendor's position from a simple order taker, hoping not to be dropped from the list of possible providers, to a collaborative contributor to the retailer's ongoing success and a true partner in the management of the business.

DON'T FOOL YOURSELF ! DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

Most retail professionals have heard some of these excuses. In fact, they may be using some of them as reasons to put off, or not move forward using the information retailers provide. What's important to understand about this opportunity is that there are no truly valid excuses, unless the intent is to simply weaken the partnership with a retailer. Ignoring the opportunity to leverage the valuable data a retailer provides makes the vendor less capable in their eyes, and an easy target for competitors.

MYTH #1 › It costs too much / Don't have a budget

This may be the easiest myth to debunk. Setting up one of these tools literally costs nothing in terms of both money and time. Ten years ago, this argument would have had a lot of merit and this project would have had plenty of opposition from the CFO, because designing and building a retail sales tracking system did take big budgets and plenty of staff time to build. And once the data structure and data warehouses were built, it still took weeks or months to understand the data.

But this argument no longer holds water. The introduction of SaaS-based, or on-demand, solutions has meant that once a substantial and suitable solution is built and running for one enterprise, it can be switched on for any number of additional companies by simply creating an account and configuring the data feeds.

LOW-COST, ON-DEMAND

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE TOOLS

MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR SUPPLIERS OF ALL SIZES TO

ANALYZE POS DATA

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Even more to the point, when retailer A sends its sales data to the SaaS data warehouse, all of its suppliers can be enabled by creating an account for each supplier that simply taps into retailer A's data stream. That means those suppliers have immediate access to the retailer's historical sales data for their products. Here are the benefits that SaaS makes available today:

1. **Low up-front costs ›** Most providers charge little to get started using this kind of service, and rightfully so, since the data and work are already in place and readily available.

2. **Up and running in hours, or days at most ›** The beauty of the cloud environment is that there is no hardware to install and no software to configure and debug. All that's necessary is an Internet connection and an account on the system. The data is already being collected and managed.

3. **Pay as you go with flexible terms for cancellations ›** Often, monthly access charges are only a few hundred dollars with flexible expansion and no-penalty cancellation policies.

4. **Free trials to get started ›** Since startup typically costs the provider nothing, and the systems and data are already in place, there's little reason the cloud services provider would need to charge for a trial run.

MYTH #2 › We don't have the analysts on staff to help us understand and use this data

Unless a supplier has already tried to actively manage their product performance using actual sales metrics supplied directly from their retailers' cash registers, they're not qualified to make that assumption. The time needed is only 30 minutes every week to check the updated reports. The tools provided with these systems make monitoring and understanding what's happening easy.

Most of these systems include a variety of automatic reports and alerts that announce updates and issues that deserve attention. This is another advantage of the way these SaaS systems have been developed. The system that is switched on today is the result of hundreds or thousands of other companies also using the systems and providing feedback to the SaaS providers that then implement those changes for everyone to benefit from.

Here are the issues vendors need to understand to know whether their company can get any value from trying out the product:

1. **The data is often updated only once each week ›** That means looking at the data every day really doesn't make sense. Retailers send updates to the SaaS data warehouse every week, and that data is incorporated into the system on a weekly basis. The result is that weekly, rather than daily, trends are shown. This interval is certainly more frequent than the user is now able to adequately assess. And updates more frequent than weekly are not of much value since they are not realistically actionable.

2. **Some weeks, there is not anything interesting going on ›** When the reports show that there is nothing out of the ordinary to report, the lack of change is quickly obvious. On those weeks, the total time spent reviewing the reports is likely to be more on the order of five minutes than the normal 30 minutes.

3. **Analytic tools are available when needed ›** When something is discovered or requires deeper investigation, tools are available at a click. These tools are designed to let the user dig into the information and explore. Not only that, since they are built into the system, they can be used right now without having to export, reformat, import, and load to external tools. Whether that means looking at the data over a different time period, drilling down from region to store level, or narrowing the view from category to product level, the tools are able to access the data directly, and lead the user to actionable conclusions. Moving through the data is fast and fluid.

Given the lack of cost and potential for improved performance, every company should at least find out if this can be useful. Remember, if competitors are not already using these systems, they are certainly going to be using them soon. If they find value, they are going to be positioned much better than the vendor on the stairs. The real costs are in NOT taking advantage of these advanced systems, and could ultimately become determining factors in the longevity of the supplier's business.

MYTH #3 › We are doing fine, don't need it

How does a vendor know? Retailers are sharing this data, and the trend is escalating quickly. More established retailers are opening up access to their sales data on an ever-increasing basis, and making it available to ALL their vendors now. And new retailers are trying to catch up. This means that every day the vendors let pass without jumping on board, they are putting their company at risk of losing their current position to the competition; vendors that take advantage of the information can use it to improve their strategic standing with customers.

The fact that there are no realistic barriers to getting started (cost, risk, time) should make entry into this progressive functionality a simple matter of finding the right provider. At a minimum, the information will allow suppliers to be more prepared, more able to defend themselves, and more capable of initiating new business propositions in buyer's meetings. The information they can have at their side during meetings can put them at a significant advantage compared to vendors not using the data.

Is it possible to put a value on a good meeting with buyers? The reality is that having a successful buyer's meeting is more valuable than whatever costs the vendor may incur to start using POS data to help run their business.

MYTH #4 › The buyer won't listen to me

If buyers won't listen to a vendor, there are a couple of issues to consider. The most obvious one is that they perceive that the information conveyed is not of any use to them. And they may have come to this conclusion from past experience. After all, without valid, current, and accurate information, what could the vendor have to tell them that they don't already know? In general, they don't need another sales pitch, particularly for products they are already carrying. And asking them to expand their offerings by putting more of the supplier's products on the shelves is the same pitch they hear from every other supplier.

What incentive can a vendor provide that will make buyers eager to hear what they have to say? They would want to hear from a vendor if they know that they have been taking advantage of the information the retailer has made available to them, and that the vendor is able to use the data to provide insights about how to better market their products, where their products are performing well, and especially where their products are not performing as best they could.

Here are a couple points to consider when buyers do not seem interested in hearing from a vendor. Start by addressing these issues, and they are likely to find an interested audience on their next call:

1. **Starting adding value ›** Buyers' responsibilities are constantly being stretched. They cannot afford to spend time watching the performance of anything other than their top 10 to 20 selling items. It's a vendor's responsibility to watch their items for the buyer. Use the opportunity to stand out from competitors, or at least become equal to all the other vendors vying for their attention. If a supplier has something compelling to give, buyers will listen.

2. **It's a poor excuse ›** If a buyer is not listening to a vendor it is the vendor's problem. Until things change, they will be forever at the bottom of the stairs. The best way to increase one's relevancy to buyers is by using the data they are providing to help them out.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A POS ANALYTICS SYSTEM

Once a supplier begins the search for a tool, there are a few basic things that they should look for. If the system they choose includes these few basic capabilities, they can be assured that it will produce useful and actionable information. Consider these to be minimum features, and it will be a good starting point to produce intelligence that will help vendors understand and enhance their products' performance.

1. **Ability to incorporate large amounts of data ›** Understand that POS information quickly adds up to huge amounts of data. Each week, retailers send detailed transactions from their POS systems to the central repository, and that data must be converted and archived. It doesn't go away when the next batch of data arrives. The data collected is cumulative, allowing the system to spot trends and notice when something different is happening. Each week's data contains sales and inventory information for every product they sell through that retailer at each of the retailer's store locations. That means the selected tool needs to be able to manage terabytes of data behind the scenes.

2. **Data modeling is the key ›** Make sure that the selected tool stores data in a format that makes it easily and quickly available for analysis. Systems designed specifically for analytical purposes store their data differently from those optimized to capture and store transactional data. Unlike transaction-oriented systems that are designed to record and store data quickly, analytical systems need to be able to retrieve data faster. Databases that store analytical data should be designed with this purpose as their main goal.

This specialized transformation of the raw POS data makes large amounts of historical data available quickly because it has been modeled to enable the user to view data from a multidimensional data perspective—the way business people view their business. This allows analytical reports to be viewed by store, by customer, by market, by product, by time, and any number of other parameters they may need to see.

The reporting and analytical capabilities of the system are designed to be used and understood by business people rather than by technicians and analysts. Fortunately, these kinds of capabilities have a long history of success in the business intelligence field that can be directly applied to POS analysis.

3. **Metrics ›** The key results of POS analytics should be viewable in easy-to-understand presentations that highlight the most important metrics that both the vendor and the retailer are concerned about. These key metrics should be presented so that they point out the issues that need attention. In particular, they should lead the user to know when something either good or bad is occurring. Here are some common POS metrics that vendors and retailers are likely already concerned with, and that should be easily accessible using the tool a supplier chooses to implement:
    - Out of stock
    - Gross margin
    - Turns/weeks of supply
    - Average retail price
    - Stock to sales
    - Sell-through

4. **Interactive ›** The analytical reports the tool produces should be interactive. Vendors should be able to quickly substitute their own unique values for nearly all dimensions of the analysis to interactively and iteratively run and rerun a favorite analysis for any product, and for any time period. And then run the same analysis for a different, or even for multiple products with minimal effort.

5. **Wizards ›** Look for prebuilt reports that can change by revising various business parameters. Ideally, the reports should have adequate options that allow suppliers to select from a wide variety of templates. This kind of ease-of-use indicates the amount of forethought and experience the product's vendor has delivered, and the vendor will be the beneficiary.

    Make sure the tool supports the ability to navigate to different levels of detail within the same report by drilling down into the specifics of any particular value. For example, the user should be able to select an item within a category, and view the detail about that item by simply clicking on the item. Similarly, they should be able to select a specific store when viewing a report about a region, and be able to see details about that store. Time frames should be available in the same way, so that when viewing a quarterly report, the user can drill into the month, and then to the week.

6. **Interface options ›** Many POS statistical applications provide options for how data is accessed and presented. One of the advantages of SaaS-based POS statistical applications is their accessibility via standard Internet connections. The ability to interact with these sophisticated systems through a simple web browser makes them easy to connect to, and provides nearly unlimited options to choose when and where they want to use them. For many users, the ability to access these systems via portable devices like smart phones or tablet devices means they can take their live analytics with them to vendor meetings, and present an interactive view to their buyers.

   In addition, the web interface means there is no software or data to be installed and maintained locally. This lowers the cost and speeds the time of deployment because no IT resources are required. These capabilities are available in most products of this type in the market.

LEARN HOW TO USE THE TOOLS

Like any tool, POS analytics are only useful if they are used to their full effectiveness. The fact that the tools are easy to use doesn't mean the vendor shouldn't master their full capabilities. Bringing a live presentation to a buyer meeting, then fumbling through the options is likely to detract from the important and powerful findings the vendor is able to provide. And even if they never do a live presentation to a buyer, understanding the ins and outs of the POS analytics tool will let them understand their products' performance at the deepest level possible.

The buyer meeting itself is where the findings from POS analytics come to their full effect. It's important that once the vendor has understood their product's performance, they plan out the presentation. And in the end, being interesting to a buyer is part providing the information they want to know, and part presenting the information in a form that is interesting. Some experts in presentation skills quote the adage, "If your audience is not interested, it's because you are not interesting." That means the vendor needs to build their skills and confidence to the point that they can deliver findings in ways that not only make a point, but also keep the buyer's attention. Here are a few points to consider when building a presentation:

- Talk about the findings in ways that the buyer can take action on them
- Form conclusions based on findings
- Make recommendations based on conclusions
- Find interesting points about what is observed
- Package the presentation so that it builds interest
- Prove the points based on the facts that have been uncovered

In essence this can be thought of as “Sales 101” rather than as a justification of the relationship with the vendor. Once a supplier has analysis that they believe in, the presentation should be easy. And like any good sales presentation they have to be able to get to the point in 15 minutes… no more. During that 15 minutes, they need to answer the buyer’s main question:

WHAT’S IN IT FOR THE BUYER (AND FOR ME)?

The vendor may have the right answer, but they still need to sell it to the buyer. There’s no way to automate the human interaction. But the POS analytical tool can give them the answers and insights that will make the buyer knowledgeable and confident that the vendor can help maximize their products’ efforts.

As seen in the stair step diagram from Steve Gerst, there is a full spectrum of relationships between suppliers and retailers. These range from the least effective to full partnerships. As a supplier, developing the relationship with a retailer can have a lasting and profound impact, not only on the success of their own products, but on the retailer’s success with their products. The risks associated with the lowest levels of relationship include being dropped as a supplier when the retailer begins to consolidate its purchasing. But even if the vendor can maintain a low-level relationship with the retailer, the sales cycle is more difficult because every sale is a new sale rather than a collaborative and cooperative effort by both the vendor and the retailer to find ways to help the products perform better.

CONCLUSION

Making a POS analytics system part of a vendor’s operation is important to the success of its products, its relationship with its retailers, and the ongoing viability of its business. Consider these key points when investigating the implementation of POS analytics:

Understanding the products’ performance in terms of their sales at a retailer’s stores or sites is a cost of doing business. More than that, it is what will enhance a vendor’s business and help them grow the success and profitability of their products.

Take advantage of meetings with buyers. Buyers are not advocates for a vendor’s products. It is not part of their job to watch the performance of the vendor’s products, and they have options in the form of competitors. Use buyer meetings as an opportunity to enhance the relationship with the buyer and present ways to make a vendor’s products stand out as top performers.

All vendors are expected to be equal to the big vendors in the eyes of the buyers. Retailers have spent considerable time and money to provide all of their vendors with the same tools and data they provide to their larger suppliers. It’s incumbent on every vendor to take advantage of these tools and deliver the information retailers expect. Given the data provided by retailers and the low cost of analytical tools available to make use of this data, there is no excuse for a vendor not to perform equally to major suppliers.

If a vendor doesn't step up to the challenge, its retailers will find vendors that are able to work with them to collaborate. Moreover, its competitors will make use of these tools to build their relationships with the retailers, eliminating the need for the buyer to invest their time and efforts chasing lower performing suppliers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JIM FROME › As Chief Operating Officer at SPS Commerce, Mr. Frome oversees global strategy, sales, marketing and operations. Since joining SPS in 2000, he has secured and expanded the company's leadership position in cloud-based supply chain management. Mr. Frome has been named a "Pro to Know" by Supply & Demand Chain, written numerous white papers, and is a frequent speaker at customer and industry events.Mr. Frome has more than 24 years of experience in technology marketing and management positions. Previously, he served as a divisional vice president of marketing at Sterling Software, and director of product management at Information Advantage.Prior to Information Advantage, Mr. Frome held several marketing and product development positions in which he focused on building business partnerships and resellers for IBM's AS400 division..

ABOUT SPS COMMERCE

SPS Commerce perfects the power of your trading partner relationships with the industry's most broadly adopted, enterprise retail cloud services platform. As a leader in on-demand supply chain management solutions, we provide prewired, proven integrations and comprehensive retail performance analytics to thousands of customers worldwide. With a singular focus on the retail marketplace, we revolutionized traditional EDI systems by developing a platform that enables highly cost-effective and reliable trading partner collaboration. SPS Commerce has achieved 49 consecutive quarters of revenue growth and is headquartered in Minneapolis. On August 12, 2012, the company acquired Edifice, a provider of cloud-based supply chain performance solutions.

SPS COMMERCE, INC.

P. 612-435-9400
333 South 7th St., Suite 1000
Minneapolis, MN 55402