

Speaking the Same Language

How Sabre Airline Solutions is leveraging Pragmatic Marketing best practices to transform and scale its business

BY DANA JONES

GROWTH AND MARKET DEMAND for products and services is a positive experience at any company, but it can also lead to challenges in maintaining consistent practices and making informed decisions. At Sabre Airline Solutions, we provide enterprise software and services for the airline industry. Over the years, we've grown our portfolio of products with in-house development, acquisitions and strategic partnerships. Given this growth, thinking about how we continue to invest and operate became more important.

When I came to work here in January 2012 as chief marketing officer, one of the first assessments I conducted was a gap analysis relative to the Pragmatic Marketing Framework. I have experience in both small start-ups and enterprise software companies, and this is the only way I knew how to operate. I walked my management team box by box through the framework, and we collectively agreed on our areas of weakness. This formed the basis for targeted initiatives that solve for these gaps and serve as foundational elements as we begin to manage our business differently.

In 2013, we decided to have Pragmatic Marketing's *Executive Briefing* onsite with a broad cross-executive leadership team. Leadership buy-in and alignment is critical toward transforming a business. We've since followed that up with three sessions of the *Foundations* and *Focus* courses, each with about 60 to 70 attendees from the product management and marketing organization. The goal was to ensure the team was on the same page as it related to best practices, and to have a framework and tools to leverage. The training, in conjunction with implementation of standard product life-cycle management practices, was the basis for evolving to a market-driven organization.

Defining Roles

With the training, we were able to bring clarity relative to the strategic and tactical parts of the Pragmatic Marketing Framework. This included product management,



product marketing, marketing communications and our interactions with technology and sales. This clarity meant everyone could focus on the jobs that needed to be done for their roles. Like all businesses, we have to manage through resource constraints—so while it's not perfect, we are making progress.

Focusing on the Building Blocks

How we were producing solution strategies and business cases was not comprehensive or consistent. And where we spent our investment dollars was based on historical trends versus long-term strategies. If you think about a product manager running his own business, long-term views of the market problems, the competitive landscape, investment and ROI, and target customers are a few key components to



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consider. Pragmatic Marketing gave us tools to put portfolio management disciplines in place and make optimized decisions based on clear strategies and business cases.

We also identified a gap in our ability to enable our field force through positioning and messaging documentation. We weren't arming them to have strategic customer conversations and show up as thought leaders. We are now working through a comprehensive sales-enablement program, including training and certification, self-study materials and key sales tools, such as customer testimonials and solution demos. To arm a global sales force will take time, but we are making huge strides.

Pricing is another key area that needed attention. Solution owners or the field team weren't armed with the right tools to make strategic pricing decisions. We needed to institute value-based pricing practices. This includes an understanding of market dynamics to set list pricing, governance councils and packaging. A lot of work commenced last year to establish this discipline.

Another example of our improvement since taking the courses is our roadmaps. We've become much more disciplined in what they should look like and have implemented that across our portfolio. Now every area uses a consistent roadmap template—something we didn't have before. More importantly, they are tied to long-term solution strategies and investment decisions. We have a quarterly cadence on roadmap approvals

and will begin to proactively share the content of the roadmaps with the field-facing teams. The goal is to communicate key changes and business rationale since the prior quarter and help them have strategic customer conversations. Roadmaps are also a key input into the development process. This process, along with artifacts like a release scope document, is helping us manage and measure our releases relative to schedule, scope and quality.

Shaking up the Culture

All of these examples are driving a culture shift from a behavioral perspective. People are asking different questions and being more proactive, because they know they have a checkpoint or a governance review coming up. We have brought in talent with needed skills and competencies such as product marketing. We are making better investment decisions to accelerate growth, gain portfolio leverage and ultimately be more competitive. All of this is leading to more collaboration across functional teams.

We're working to grow the language of Pragmatic Marketing within the organization. Getting ourselves thinking the same way was a big feat. Terms like "NIHITO" (nothing important happens in the office), "roadmap," "solution strategies" and "buyer personas" are now becoming part of our basic dialogue.

The Future Looks Bright

Transformation doesn't happen overnight and there is still work to do. What we are applying from Pragmatic Marketing is foundational to our long-term growth, and best practices are being leveraged across other business units. Our customers are starting to see the differences in the way we show up in the market and engage the community. That is the ultimate test of success—being a thought partner and driving value for our customers. After all, it does start with an understanding of the market problem! **PM**

About the Author

Dana Jones is senior vice president and chief marketing officer for Sabre Airline Solutions. A seasoned product, marketing and operations software executive with over 17 years of experience building successful technology businesses, Dana joined Airline Solutions in 2012 and leads the Marketing and Solutions Management organization.