The War On FAEs (Part 3): Management Shifts To Active Aggression

by the OT Club

In parts one and two of this series, we recalled what it was like to work as a semiconductor FAE in the past. First, we discussed the good times experienced early on during the "we were kings" period,[1] followed by a period of "benign neglect"[2] when our roles started to be devalued. Today, as semiconductor FAEs we often find ourselves in a hostile work environment in which management has initiated a full-scale war to get rid of us or at least minimize our standing so that we're seen but not heard.

In this article, we will delve further into the factors that created the current atmosphere for FAEs and how these factors have affected us. While we can't offer a formula for changing the conditions that led to the current scenario in the semiconductor industry, perhaps we can help other FAEs in the industry to realize what problems are common, and how to make sense of situations that might otherwise seem illogical. Finally, we will offer a couple basic strategies that may help you to deal with the day-to-day frustrations of being an FAE.

The Underlying Problems And Their Effects

There are three root causes which got us here. First and foremost was having FAEs report to sales. Salespeople, God love them, do not have a strategic bone in their body. Everything is reactive—rush, hurry, important, red phone, do it now! Cross this parts list of 2000 parts (half of which are capacitors, resistors, and sheet metal screws, which we do not make). FAEs and sales have similar goals. However, they want to make us into technical salespeople, which we are not.

We are in a situation now where our survival is threatened because the customers love what we do but sales, marketing and management can't stand us. We speak the truth and deal with reality versus forecasted nonsense, internal monkey motion and databases.

The second root cause was the "financialization" of American business. Finance and operations people have taken over everything and if they do not understand it, then it must not be important. They have metrics and analysis for everything except what should be measured and what is important. As FAEs now work together with salespeople, the job description for FAEs has become less distinct and harder to explain to the finance and operations people.

They ask us "what is it you do really?" But the explanations FAEs give to finance and operations never mesh with their understanding or requirements. Their response is something like "I don't understand a word you said, and I don't know how that fits into my spreadsheets, metrics and financial dashboard, which is updated every 15 minutes." Because the FAE's impact is not measurable with their instant metrics, and therefore cannot be justified in their eyes, the importance of the FAE role has been pushed further down on the importance scale.

Related to this is the fact that the FAEs' work with customers takes time and we build relationships with the customers over time that gains or maintains the customers' business over the long term. But for sales and finance people, the time scales for evaluating things are much shorter—typically monthly or quarterly metrics.

One characteristic of both sales and finance people is that they have meetings and updates on things that move slowly more frequently than needed. It is like measuring the temperature in your refrigerator every 22 nanoseconds—it just does not move that fast.

"Where is the customer in the funnel this week? Well, call them and ask the engineer." OK, but the engineer has blocked our number because we keep bugging him. (Note to customers: When you are working with one of us sometimes you may get strange responses. Please understand that it's not us, it's our sales overlords directing us to do strange things.)

The third root cause of the hostile environment for FAEs is what we will call, for lack of a better description, a war on competence. In many organizations if you are competent and want to get something tangible and significant done (other than generating fluffy reports and playing with spreadsheets and SAP, Oracle, and salesforce.com) the "collective" will turn on you and get you to go back in that box that you were told to think out of.

As an example, at one company when FAEs wanted excellence in new products, the sales and marketing types would counter with "minimum viable product". Just make it good enough, they said, and release it and run off to the next thing. The attitude became, "don't listen to the engineers they just slow things down."

How things have changed. In the past, we had to read "In Search of Excellence" and other books that mandated serving customers with uncompromising excellence. That thinking is no longer allowed. The mantra is now minimum viable service, minimum viable everything. Mediocrity is celebrated and excellence is the enemy as finance—the real customer—is in charge.

The divide between FAEs and our colleagues in sales in marketing reflects a larger conflict within semiconductor companies: In many cases, we have found that non-engineers really do not care or want to listen to technical people unless they must. Salespeople often have short attention spans and do not want to take the time to try and understand what FAEs are telling them. Our input is not important to them until the customer asks for something they do not understand. When that happens, then they want us to fix the problem. Of course, in that case, it is never fast enough. The salespeople seem to criticize everything we do even when customers are happy.

We mentioned previously how salespeople tend to be reactive rather than proactive. One effect of this characteristic is that they do not want to spend time or money doing anything strategic. It is all tactical response du jour. They also will not spend time or money on technical stuff, whether it is the test gear FAEs need, or trying to understand customer needs, products, or whatever has to be done from a technical perspective. In their minds, that stuff just slows down metrics, short-term gains and sales.

While no time or money can be spent on necessary things our customers are asking for, the opposite is true for anything remotely connected to Saleforce.com. There is not enough money and technology on earth that can be thrown at that. For example, sales and marketing are eager to invest in a service or product that "tests SFDC".[3] But what is the point of testing the sales software, if the data that's been entered merely reflects the lies the customer told you so they could get samples? It's the simulation of the simulation and checkers tracking checkers, spending time on things customers will never see or care about. But management loves it, so do more of it.

We have discussed a number of areas where FAEs and salespeople differ. There is also an inherent conflict between sales and engineering. In sales, ignorance is sometimes the first line of defense. If the salespeople do not know much about a product or what the company can deliver, they can make any claim and provide any assurance. If they do not know anything, they are not lying. Who cares? All that matters is making the sale.

In engineering, ignorance is no excuse. We are bound by professional ethics. People can get hurt if we do something wrong. If we do not know, we are wired to figure it out. Research the data. Perform the test. Work out the math. In short, get answers. (Of course, there's no time for that anymore.)

Given these differences, is it any wonder that many FAEs find it deeply offensive that they must report to sales, marketing or, even worse, a combined sales/marketing management? But we lost that battle long ago.

And our incompetence can be self-fulfilling. Because we are viewed as being uncooperative and stupid by sales and marketing, the product line managers will not share inside information with us. But if we do not have inside information and cannot get it, that makes us seem even less knowledgeable, and contributes to the attitude that FAEs are expendable.

What Happened To Customer Focus?

An organization is a vehicle which serves to satisfy the needs of a customer or groups of customers. The more efficiently this is done, the more satisfied the customer(s), which makes the organization more successful in the long term. FAEs exist to help satisfy the customers. So, if the organization makes a high-tech product or service why then would FAEs not be vitally important to the overall organization?

The operative word here is *long term*. No one is looking or caring about the long term anymore. The focus is on today's metrics, we will worry about tomorrow later.

Perhaps another reason FAEs are not valued is that the stated goal does not line up with the actual goal. Since the Dot.com era, semiconductor FAEs have encountered a strange string of management. This is what seems to have befuddled the authors as a group for so long. The only answer we can come up with is that those who are running things now no longer see the organization as a vehicle to serve customers. On the contrary, the customer is viewed as a huge distraction from the actual goal, which is management's self-aggrandizement and career furthering.

Moreover, corporate management at many companies has totally lost touch with the customer. In some cases, the leadership has not visited a customer for decades. They are too busy with internally focused meetings about how to cut costs of things such as maintaining the break room, or saving money by not re-striping the parking lot. Metrics are the real customer and costs must be cut no matter what.

In the worst cases, the power kings may see the organization as a vehicle for their own plundering. Making short term changes that result in cost cutting can give the appearance of progress, so that financial results look good in the short term, which then allow the company to be sold, or to pump and dump shares, or some other financial engineering. In some companies, this form of "engineering" has become way more important than the actual engineering that FAEs and others do. We see this reflected in the many mergers and acquisitions in the industry.

Considering such activities, it appears that for some, the "customers" are now Wall Street, i.e., the investors. Meanwhile, the customers who are buying the actual semiconductor products are treated more as line items on a CRM report so that management can pump up the "opportunities in the funnel," with manipulated data to achieve the desired financial goals. If the FAEs start working to serve the product-buying customers, they are not serving the cause of pleasing investors, and therefore viewed with hostility by management. What we do is all customer focused yet satisfying the customer is no longer the goal in many organizations, especially ones run by finance–operations and lawyers—which is the majority of organizations today.

Some Tips For Survival

It was noted in an earlier part of this series, that there are exceptions to this war on FAEs scenario. Some semiconductor companies do still value the FAE role. But as FAEs with years of experience at different companies, we have seen that the general trend holds—companies do not want technical FAEs, they want sales engineers.

To illustrate, here's an actual story from one of our team: A customer said a demo board didn't do what they wanted exactly, so the FAE modified it and the customer was thrilled. The sales person and management were furious. They said, "That's not what an FAE does! And your sales metrics are down this month, so why are you wasting time doing that!"

This FAE received a horrible annual review despite the fact he's a brilliant, seasoned power electronics engineer. So this individual took an offered package and got paid for a year to go work for a competitor. The FAE now reports to a technical chain of command, not a sales chain of command.

So, what are the long-term prospects for semiconductor FAEs? The answer is we just do not know. We're not sure if there even is a future for FAEs.

With all the mergers and acquisitions, there are fewer and fewer places left to work and the number shrinks even further if you seek companies where you don't have to report to sales and/or marketing. If there is no technical management above you, then don't take the job because there won't be a buffer between you and the wackiness in upper management. Eventually, it will rock your world negatively.

But aside from avoiding the most egregious work situations, there are some simple tactics FAEs can apply to deal with the constraints of the business.

First, when helping the customer, focus on the immediate issue at hand. To use an analogy, if someone asks you what time it is, just tell them. As engineers, we like to be helpful and may want to elaborate and tell them the weather, how to improve their survivability against a storm, how to install a GPS synchronized clock, how to install a generator, etc. But the sales team only wants you to answer the question the customer asked. Doing so is a good survival technique. Speak only when spoken to and only give the answer to the question asked. Do not elaborate—sales hates that.

Secondly, use the "negative accept" internally to get answers to questions. So often, just asking a question of your colleagues to get some needed information or approval produces no response. This is the usual "ghosting" that can be so frustrating. Ask a question, get ignored. On the other hand, if you indicate a course of action that you will take in the absence of a response, this often produces one.

For example, if your email says, "If I don't hear back from you, I will go ahead and launch the new product or tell _____to the customer on Tuesday at 2 PM EST," then all of a sudden you get a response such as "Oh please add this, change that or wait for HQ approval." The negative accept lends urgency to your request, breaks through the silence, and helps you to be productive. It forces real action because if they don't respond you have an email trail that's says "well I told you I was going to do_____."

Although these tips are simple, they can also be highly effective. And while they will not eliminate the war on FAEs, they may help to avoid some of the potential conflicts that can arise in the FAE's daily work. In a later article we will elaborate on survival tips in the new world order.

The intended end state for most companies is to get humans out of the loop. Think Walmart self-checkout. Some companies are exploring AI to answer your technical questions so no FAE or even factory apps engineers are needed. At least that is the goal—to get rid of us altogether since we don't do anything they really care about.

References

1. "The War On FAEs (Part 1): Remembering When FAEs Ruled"

2. "The War On FAEs (Part 2): New Management Brings Benign Neglect"

3. Just as an example of a product that tests the sales software, see "Parasoft, Automated Software Testing. Use Automation and AI to Accelerate Salesforce Testing".

Do you have any comments on this column? If so, share them with the editor.