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# Developing Impenetrable Business Relationships

by MICHAEL E. REGA

**W**hat separates top professional key customer managers from the ordinary is their ability to penetrate the department and truly bond the buyer and seller together. Whether it is their planning, their sheer determination, the strength of their personalities, their hard work, or an infinite number of other possible combinations, the result is that both the buyer and seller feel the other is a vital, important element of their organization.

The important attitude requirements for a key customer manager are:

- Commitment — The client must feel that the key customer manager truly understands their situation and problems. This could range from a major technical or organizational problem to a political problem within the company. The key is responsiveness. It is an attitude of concern and commitment — jumping in and being totally committed to helping the customer without hesitating or making them feel obligated.
- Expertise — Key customer managers must understand the customer's business as well as their own.

For managers to penetrate the account, they must possess an attitude of expertise. This requires the rep to stay current with technology, market trends and client issues. If you are willing to accept these prerequisites

for truly bonding with your clients, follow these critical steps to enter the inner circle of influence.

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## Counselor Approach

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Your customer's perception of you is in direct proportion to your own approach. If you view them totally as a source of revenue, then your job is to negotiate orders. In turn, the client will perceive and classify you as a supplier. The measure of your worth will be in the price/performance ratio of your bid as compared to your competitor's. On the other hand, if you view your mission as a problem finder, problem solver and profit improver for the customer, you will in turn be viewed as a consultant and a welcome member of their team. They will feel a need for your expertise and your worth will be in direct relation to your value and profit improvement to their organization, not in relation to the lowest bidder in the market.

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## Exposure

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Very seldom do key customer managers get to the inner circle without some help along the way. Most often, in the early stages of their research, they do an excellent organizational analysis. During this process, they seek to identify certain people of significance in the organization who would stand to benefit from their recommendations. These people are potential

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champions for your cause and must be sold on the ideas you are recommending and on the need to help you get the proper exposure at all levels of their organization. The development and nurturing of the proper champions may be vital to your success. It is much easier to get an appointment when the subordinates are positioning you as someone with whom the executive must meet.

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### Collective Problem Solving and Implementation

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Most successful key customer managers position themselves early in the relationship as consultants. They work with the customer to develop the financial analysis and proper solutions, as well as implementation plans to meet their needs. They then assist the customer through the implementation phase of the sale after the order has been received. In doing this, a bonding takes place at all levels of the organization. In effect, the key customer manager stays very close with the customer through all phases of the sale including the implementation phase. By doing this, they are capitalizing on the opportunity to bond at all levels of the client organization.

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### Confidentiality

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Being welcomed into the inner circle conveys a special level of trust. For someone outside the company to be elevated to this position indicates they must have demonstrated that they can be trusted. Many times they will be given confidential data, marketing plans, business strategies or other pieces of very important information. The client must feel that this information will be held in strict confidence. Much like the doctor-patient relationship, if the trust is not there, there is no relationship.

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### Advisory

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The last rung on the ladder is when the client comes to you for advice. The best problem to solve for the key customer manager is the one he or she

has identified, brought to management's attention and proceeded to solve. This is done through products, a new service, an idea or a change in their process.

These steps will take the rep inside the client, but sustaining that relationship is your new goal. We live in a business environment where individuals move in their careers frequently. The key to sustaining your relationship is contact at all points in the organization. You must stay in touch with all levels and continue to look for problems to solve. The more you solve, the stronger the bond. As a result, the more valuable you become to their organization, the longer you will keep this key account. □

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