
Common Sales Challenges That Prevent Executive-Level Access

by JEFF THULL

With the complexity of today's business solutions and their far-reaching effects, more often than not senior-level executives are actively involved in the process of assessing the issues and their options. Yet many companies are finding their best sales and marketing strategies are highly diluted by the time they reach their customers, and their sales professionals are not connecting to the power in the executive suite.

Gaining access and connecting to executive decision makers is one challenge that most sales professionals continue to seek a better solution to. There are several common challenges that sales professionals need to resolve in order to effectively engage the executive suite. Consider the following situations, how often they occur within your team and how you currently are approaching each.

- *When was the last time you couldn't connect to the executive's critical business issues and were delegated down to a support level?*

Brilliant ideas and valuable products and services fall to in-

difference if you can't immediately establish credibility and connect to the executive's most pressing issues. Your credibility comes via the relevancy you establish in your introduction by connecting your solutions or capabilities to the business drivers of the executive. By referencing challenges the industry is facing or objectives this company has stated in their public records, the executive will recognize you've thought this through and you couldn't have this conversation with anyone else.

- *You realized that your strongest contact in your customer's*

organization no longer held the power to make the buying decision.

In today's highly competitive and volatile marketplace, globalization, consolidation and centralization are some of the causes of decisions moving to higher levels of power and influence. This movement is forcing even the most experienced sales professionals to expand their expertise and compete at levels not required before. Expecting that a single contact in your customer's organization can and will carry your message effectively is hanging on to thin threads of hope. It is critical that we translate the

value we can create at the technical, operational or clinical level to the impact it has on the performance drivers on the executive's dashboard, and have those conversations with each executive. Recognizing the dials they are watching and being able to discuss their current measurements and how your solution will impact those measurements is a conversation most executives will be open to discuss.

- ***Your competition was in the executive suite, and you weren't.***

Can the competition get to the executive suite and take your account while you believe your relationship is strong at the operations level? Absolutely! Let's face it: your competition would have the advantage. People typically spend more time preparing for a prospect visit than they do for a customer visit. Don't let over-familiarity lull you into understanding less about your customer than your competitor would prepare for. Gain advantage and pull ahead of competitive threats by establishing a broad base of relationships that will preempt and neutralize competitive moves.

- ***You bought into, "I make the final decision," when in fact, political moves and ego games got you hung up with someone who can barely influence the decision.***

Don't let diluted messages

sabotage your best opportunities. Understand how your solution affects each level of responsibility within your customer's organization. It is only natural that you will interact at all levels to understand the full potential your solution will have, and after the sale to assure that the full value of your solution is being achieved. Building these relationships as you gather information will ensure you are firmly grounded with those who are both impacted and influenced by the decision.

- ***You finally reached the person who held the checkbook, but you couldn't build the financial case they needed to make the buying decision.***

The financial executive plays an increasingly central role in setting the strategy of the organization and how to fund the implementation of the strategy. Do not place the burden on your customers of translating your technical advantages into the financial impact of your solution. Involve them in your calculations; have them collaborate and adjust your assumptions. In the end, the customer must "own" the justification. Be their advisor, not their sales rep. Position your solution as a strategic asset.

- ***Third-party consultants forced you to compete on price when you knew that the value you would create for the customer was not***

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making it to the executive level in your customer's organization.

Recognize that you and the consultant have the same customer. Build the case for mutual gains with the consultant by asking the questions they have not thought of asking and don't have the answers to. They will recognize the value you add to their position and invite you into the executive suite. Help third-party consultants manage a quality buying process that builds successful outcomes for them, for you and for your customers.

- ***Your convincing proposal won the first round of approvals, but you later found that the executive buy-in never happened.*** The executive had criteria on the table that you never tapped into, or even knew existed.

Engage the executives early in the decision process to establish the criteria that creates senior-level ownership. Build winning proposals that connect the business drivers at all levels of influence and decision. Ask the in-depth questions your customer has not thought of asking. Ask questions that expose the risks inherent in a successful implementation of your solution.

Executives are concerned about working with suppliers that truly understand their business,

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

For the past 22 years, Jeff Thull, CEO/President of Prime Resource Group, has gained a

reputation for his expertise in the arena of sales and marketing strategies for companies involved in complex sales. His wealth of real world experience has made him a leading authority and valued advisor for executive teams of major companies worldwide. Contact Information: Prime Resource Group, Inc.; (800) 876-0378; www.primeresource.com.

their customers' demands and their competitive landscape, as well as the challenges associated with the implementation. If you cannot speak to these issues, your time in the executive suite will be brief at best.

To help you get started in gaining access and communicating with credibility, here are suggestions:

- **Understand the executive mind-set and be empowered to connect to top executives** — Gain insight into how they think, what they expect, what makes them move forward, and how they drive management support. They are looking for ideas and resources to execute their strategy, and how to reduce risk and increase the probability of success.
- **Create compelling relevancy that gains you access to the executive suite** — Build a value as-

sumption that will connect your capabilities to the executive agenda and ensure you have a strong executive-level sponsorship to prove or disprove the hypothesis.

- **Know how to establish exceptional credibility with corporate executives** — Expected credibility is what you know about your solution. Exceptional credibility is what you know about your customer's business. Look at your words and your documents. Are they about you and your solution or are they about your customer and their business?

When you understand the mind-set of the executive, connect to their agenda and establish exceptional credibility, you will find yourself having meaningful conversations that often result in long-term and mutually beneficial relationships. ▣

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One Spectrum Pointe, Suite 150, Lake Forest, CA 92630-2283 • Phone: (949) 859-4040 • Toll-free: (877) 626-2776 • Fax: (949) 855-2973
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