



# WHO'S GUARDING THE COOP?

EDITORIAL | BILL BROOKS

HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR KEY ACCOUNTS  
AND KEEP YOUR COMPETITORS OUT



## BILL BROOKS

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For many salespeople, **one single account provides as much as 30 percent of their total personal sales volume** — a statistic that keeps many of us up at night!

But instead of causing you stress, it ought to be telling you something important about the amount of time you should be putting into managing your current customer list. Managing your relationships with your existing accounts is one of the most essential tasks you should be performing every day.

Key and strategic customers have unique requirements that the best salespeople monitor regularly and seek to fulfill. You can't just assume that these customers will keep buying from you — don't ever forget that your top accounts are your competitor's top prospects! Keeping the sales volume you've earned from these customers takes attention to detail, discipline, and a consistent approach — it's hard work, and even the best salespeople make mistakes.

Let's look at just a few of the best techniques we've found for making the most of your most important accounts:

**Use a system for managing your key and strategic accounts.** Selling to key accounts requires careful planning and an organized approach. You can't (or shouldn't) just stop by with donuts — or lunch. That positions you as a friendly delivery person, not as a strategic resource who can partner with your customers to get the results they need. A true account management plan will help you monitor activity in each key and strategic account and illuminate any areas that need extra attention.

**Remember that key account management is not only about relationships.** Fixing immediate business pain is not based on friendly relationships. It's based on competency and results. On the other hand, strong relationships get built

based on fixing ongoing, meaningful problems. So how do you stop "selling yourself" and concentrate on becoming a value resource?

The single best piece of advice we can give you is: follow an orderly, non-manipulative sales process that allows you to uncover what your customers will buy, when they will buy, and how they would like to buy from your firm. Most sales processes are fundamentally similar — pick one and follow it diligently.

**Figure out which customers to pursue and which to let go — and tap the full potential of the best customers you have.** Having a clear "go/no-go" process that guides your interactions within your key and strategic accounts from the beginning virtually guarantees that you are spending quality time with the accounts that offer the most potential (and the least — or no — time with the price-buyers and never-satisfied customers).

**Don't jump the gun.** Just because you want an account to be a key account does not make it so! We have seen too many salespeople invest far too much time, energy or resources on accounts that don't stack up well against others. Every account isn't going to become a key account. Think about every client on your key client list. Ask yourself:


- ❑ Does this client have a need for additional products, solutions, or processes that my company offers?
- ❑ Does my contact at the firm have the legitimate authority and financial ability to buy or commit to upgraded or additional offerings?
- ❑ Does this client have a sense of urgency about making additional buying decisions?
- ❑ Does this client trust me and my organization through proven availability, predictable delivery, high levels of service, ease of purchase, and commitment on your part?
- ❑ In short, do you have a proven track record as a vital business ally — as someone who will promise a lot and deliver even more?

## FIGURE OUT WHICH CUSTOMERS TO PURSUE AND WHICH TO LET GO — AND TAP THE FULL POTENTIAL OF THE BEST CUSTOMERS YOU HAVE.

## DON'T EVER FORGET THAT YOUR TOP ACCOUNTS ARE YOUR COMPETITOR'S TOP PROSPECTS!

**Pay attention to your lower profile key accounts.** It's true that sometimes the squeaky wheel gets the grease. But while you're giving the squeaky wheel grease, you may be missing something a less-demanding or lower profile customer is doing. There's a famous quote attributed to Napoleon: "To be outmaneuvered? Yes. To be surprised? Never." If you are truly and productively engaged with these clients, you'll never be surprised. If a client is ready to investigate buying a new product or service from you soon, you'll know about it. And if the client has received an intriguing proposal from your competitor, you'll know about that, too.

**Educate your customers about impending upgrades, new product introductions, research and development plans, etc.** Your company's key and strategic accounts always should be able to rely on you to keep them informed about how your products or services are changing for the better, how your prices have changed and why, and how you (personally) will help them navigate any changes your company is making. Educating your customers about planned changes in advance not only positions your company well, but it allows your customers to anticipate how to apply your products or service in new, different ways.

In short, know who your most important customers are, and follow a logical account management process that enables you to stay productively engaged with them over a long period of time. If you do this, and do it well, not only will you build a lucrative account for yourself right now, but you'll be in the position of constantly reinforcing the value that you bring the customer so that you keep their business over the long term. 



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