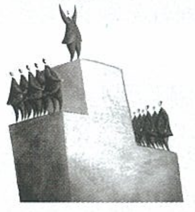

Higher calling

Uncover hidden sales opportunities in your existing accounts by strategically tapping into higher levels of management. By Ken Valla

Expanding your customer base has always been expensive, and it may be even more so today. In an uncertain economic climate, few firms seem ready to take the risk of starting out with new suppliers. Instead, it makes sense to look for new opportunities in accounts where you are already doing business.

The challenge: The comfort-zone trap

The good news about working with existing customers? You have established relationships, and are already a trusted supplier. But here's the bad news: Comfortable relationships that bring repeat business can also become traps that keep you from finding out about potential new business. Typically, salespeople develop a small number of contacts in a particular area, and even though they know they should be calling on a broader range of strategic decision makers, breaking out into other areas seems risky. The perception—and the reality—is that most executives see little reason to spend precious time talking with salespeople.

Yet if you don't engage in such conversations, you'll miss hidden opportunities that lie outside your usual area and level of influence. As companies continue to exercise tight control over spending, midlevel managers are more restricted in their budget authority than they used to be. This means that higher-level personnel are likely making decisions about priorities and funding. Customers are focusing their funding on a few strategic goals. The real room for growth lies in understanding those targeted areas.

In order to do so, you must overcome your reluctance about developing relationships with strategic decision makers in new areas of your customer's organization. Start by using a three-step calling strategy to meet with the right people at the right levels across the organization.

Step 1: Identify who to call.

The foundation of a successful calling strategy is an analysis of which functional areas to target, then of which people to contact in each area. Decisions about where to call should focus on such issues as:

- Product development goals
- Financial objectives
- The company's competitive landscape
- Market strategy
- External events, such as regulatory or technology changes
- Company changes, such as shifts in leadership, mergers and reorganization

Once you understand the key issues that may be driving the company's priorities, identify functional leaders who can explain the company's primary goals and accountabilities, as well as the executives who have both a business-unit and a corporate perspective.

Step 2: Understand Critical Success Factors (CSFs).

Most salespeople will say that their greatest concern about calling higher is that they feel unprepared to answer the question of why it is worth an executive's time to talk to them. To respond to that query with confidence, you need to be ready to leave your product presentation at the door and talk credibly about the one topic sure to be of interest to any executive: his or her most pressing business issues.

Although it is clearly necessary to verify those specific issues with each individual, you can start out your conversation by demonstrating an understanding of factors affecting the customer's industry. One approach is to frame those concerns in terms of Critical Success Factors, defined by John Rockart, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as "the few key areas of activity in which favorable results are absolutely necessary for a...[company] to reach its goals."

Note the phrasing *few* and *to reach its goals*. Only a handful of true CSFs exist, and they cannot be defined by the goals themselves, but by what must happen in order to reach the goal. The "critical" in Critical Success Factors means that if these few things don't go well, the organization could fail to achieve the results expected by the leadership and investors. (This explains why CSFs are sometimes described as "what keeps executives awake at night.")

The value of the CSF concept: It provides a framework for carrying out thorough research to learn about a customer's industry and market context. Once you have good information about the CSFs affecting that customer, you will be prepared to open up a conversation by asking intelligent questions that will generate further dialogue.

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Step 3: Lead a business—not a sales—conversation.

Once you've gathered the right information about the industry and the company, you are ready to plan your in-person meeting with an executive. Your objectives: to deliver value to the executive and to confirm goals and CSFs. Many leaders have not asked themselves what steps they need to take to reach a particular goal. Discussing their goals in terms of CSFs will encourage them to engage in the conversation while clarifying their own thinking.

To start a discussion of CSFs, consider opening the interaction by referencing some of the industry CSFs you have discovered, then asking the executive if those issues are relevant in his organization. This can lead to a discussion of one or more specific functional goals. Here's how you might start out:

- "Many of my customers in your industry are concerned about [industry issue]. Does this affect your business also? What is being done to address it?"
- "What can you tell me about your own current goals?"
- "What are the factors that have to go just right in order for you to achieve [goal X]?"

The payoff: Uncover new business opportunities.

Having this kind of discussion with a broad range of customer executives will provide a clear picture of where their organization is most likely to direct attention and funding—and where new business opportunities can be found. Building these new relationships takes time and an investment of resources, but it is more efficient and effective than starting from scratch to court new customers where you have no existing relationships or insider knowledge. Then, as companies become more willing to release funds and to consider new projects, you can begin using this same approach to expand the base of your business. You'll find that you and your entire sales team will be able to build a greater variety of relationships in new accounts from the very beginning. ET

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