

Consultant Nicholas Read offers sensible advice on how to break through barriers to your prospects – and how to make an impact in the limited time you have with them.

Maximizing

FACE TIME

With Customers

BY JACK FOSTER



Manufacturers expect their independent reps to maximize face time with prospects and customers to ensure a steady flow of orders. At the same time, reps strive to achieve that across-the-desk access to customers, whether they are top company decision-makers or purchasing agents, in order to guarantee their long-term success. Achieving that face-time goal is easier said than done, however.

Whichever decision-making level the rep is calling on, challenges facing the rep remain the same, and paramount among those challenges is the pressing need to understand what customers want and need. Accord-

ing to Nicholas Read, president of the consulting firm SalesLabs (www.saleslabs.com) and co-author of *Selling to the C-Suite*, “Whatever level the rep is selling to, there [are] a number of principles that remain universal.

“Today’s customers expect you to do your homework before meeting them,” he emphasizes. “Besides reading the papers [from] where their offices or factories are located to learn how local current affairs affect them, hit the search engines.

“Type in the company name, the executive’s name and assorted search criteria, such as *strategy*, *problem*, *goal*, *revenue*, *debt*, *challenge*, etc. Research their latest news,



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their competitors' news, and their biggest customers' news. They might not want to hear about your company or product in the middle of their business day; but they'll always talk about their customers, industry direction and market rivals – if you're informed enough to talk as a peer at that level."

That's why it's so important to get schooled on your customers. "You want to be credible enough in their world for them to be interested in yours."

That's just the beginning, however. "Then you have to prepare smart questions or statements to catch their interest on the call, [to] show you've done your homework. There's no point doing the work if you don't get credit for it.

"Ask how certain problems, processes or events are affecting them, but be prepared to offer 'For example, I read yesterday that...' or 'John, the factory manager over at XYZ Corp., tells me he sees the following trends, which [are] the same as what some people in the trade magazines are saying. So how do you see it going?' You have to be seen as part of their industry, with your finger on the pulse. Only then can you give context to what you're selling and explain it in terms of what it means to them."

Solve Problems

Read maintains that the challenge is that a customer with an interest or curiosity will spend time with you, listening to your presentation and asking lots of questions about your capability, but will often go nowhere near signing an order form. Why? "Because they don't have a problem to solve. And unless they see a problem that's urgent or important to invest in, they won't reach into their pocket to pay you. Why should they?"

The consultant stresses that too many reps spend their whole day with prospects like this. "Their call activity looks good on their weekly report. But really all they've achieved is a bunch of social calls. Smart salespeople learn to have discussions that transition the customer from a state of being content with how they do things and the equipment they're using today, to a state where they're genuinely agitated and concerned that the status-quo isn't acceptable anymore."

Read relates that when he goes on coaching calls with reps, he sees many of them trying to create this dissatisfaction by comparing their newest product features and outputs with what the customer already has installed. "If the customer's equipment is old and outdated and it's time to upgrade anyway, you might get lucky. But usually because there's no burning fire in that discussion, they can take it or leave it. But when you move away from product comparisons and instead talk about what's

coming at them around the next bend, or where they're lagging behind their industry peers, or how they're losing orders, or time, or efficiency, or profit, or their risk is higher than it needs to be – all non-product discussions that show the status-quo isn't as peachy after all – then you create a climate where they're more inclined to ask 'What can be done?' And you say 'I'm glad you asked...'"

Satisfying a Need

He continues, "At that point, the features and benefits of your product have context and relevance. The customer is open to learning how to improve because they've woken up to the fact that a need exists. Remember: a customer with an interest will spend time, but only a customer with a problem will spend money."

He urges reps to learn to research, ask smart questions and have these types of discussions. "Today's buyers tell us they respond to this approach more readily and will open up to a real two-way dialogue once they see the rep isn't just trying to pitch something. They want to see you're able to have a discussion that explores the issues that, deep down inside, they're really troubled by, but they have nobody to bounce ideas off. Be that sounding board for them. You'll learn more about your customer in one meeting like this than you can in a year of reading about them. But to open them up, the price for admission is to do your homework on these issues and their business. Product knowledge alone doesn't get you there."

To get there, however, the independent rep usually has to successfully navigate the myriad "gatekeepers" whose goal it is to keep them from those face-to-face meetings with decision-makers. Read offers some guidance.

"The most effective approach for gaining prospect/customer access turns out to be through their personal network of subordinates and others who have more time to talk and are more accessible," he says. "Let's call this their tribe – the people they go to for ideas, and the people they rely upon to make things happen in their business. When you are referred to a decision-maker by someone they trust, your chances of getting a meeting leaps to 84% because it's a warm referral. By contrast, cold calling opens only four of every 100 doors.

"It's true they guard their calendar with secretaries, purchasing agents or lower managers, [but] this is often a legitimate division of labor and not an attempt to avoid you. Even the most [inexperienced] gatekeeper knows the difference between a peddler pitching their wares and a business person with value to add."

Look Like You Belong

Read observes, "If the signals you send out tell people you belong at the executive level, for instance, you have a

better chance of getting there compared to the rep who talks and acts like a vendor desperate for a sale. You end up being sent where you look like you belong. If you want to get to more executives, dress, talk and think like they do.”

In addition, it’s important to treat secretaries like they’re executives. “Certainly they know what’s occupying the bosses’ time. Tell them you want to bounce your ideas off them so they can judge if it’s worth putting on the executive’s calendar. Tell them the issues you’ve read about that affect their company. Explain some ideas you want to explore with the executive. But don’t pitch your product. Pitch the business problem or value the product represents. If they see you represent something the boss is currently thinking about, and if you look like someone who should be dealing higher up, chances are you won’t get ignored or sent down.”

There’s more. “When you’re in a meeting with some of the executive’s team, listen to them. Watch them. Figure out who most embodies the attitudes of the executive. Who do they defer to, and is it always the ranking officer? When it’s not, you’ve found yourself someone with influence, likely to have the executive’s ear. These people may be the ones serving as a communication bridge into the executive office. Selling to them is as good as selling to the executive, because if they buy into your ideas, your message will not only reach the boss, but it will carry their endorsement with it.”

Read stresses that it’s critical to respect prospects’/ customers’ time and sell to their subordinates, who are closer to the operation and are better able to judge if your ideas are of value. If these people get sold, and if you make a case that the next round of dialogue is best discussed with the ultimate decision-maker, they are more likely to grant a meeting.

The Value of Technology

Read acknowledges that high on the list of effective gatekeepers blocking you from customers is technology. However, he notes, “We can be too dependent on technology and then blame a server crash for not hitting our quota. If we’re not careful, technology becomes an excuse for mediocrity. Give a rep a car, a phone and an order pad. That’s all the technology they needed until about 10 years ago, and I believe the rising generation of salespeople [lacks] the type of personal accountability and street smarts that existed when we had more paper and less tech.

“But today we need to save the forests, so we push all this online. Fine. Just use it the right way. We have a tendency to over-complicate the act of selling with tools we don’t need. I appreciate the need for reports, but only

if they [are reviewed] and if insights are extracted and reported back to the rep to help [him] do better. Too often, technology-driven reports are a black hole that gives nothing back to the rep.”

He emphasizes that the social networking tool LinkedIn helps you see what communities and interests your buyers are involved in. Outlook helps you manage your calendar. Blackberry and iPhone keep you in touch on the road. “I’m a fan. Sign me up. But the real nub of this topic is the CRM white elephant, right? It’s an area I’m deeply troubled by because contact management and forecasting tools came from the retail marketing trade, where marketing analysts used customer-spending trends to know how to best bundle and price their products across different customer demographics. The bigger the sample of people, the better the trends could be spotted. And with this data, supermarkets knew to put cereal packs on the end of aisles and banks knew which customers were most likely to respond to an offer for a loan extension. But all this is for mass marketing, not business-to-business selling, which happens one sales call at a time.”

Read recalls that in the 1990s, “Some ‘bright spark’ claimed salespeople could sell more if they had a database to store all their contacts in. Most reps I know saw this for what it really was – manufacturers didn’t know who their sales agents were talking to, didn’t want their reps to have so much power, and so wanted to get their hands around those relationships at the corporate level. There was also a claim that executives would have a better handle on their sales forecast if reps reported their deals in a system through which they could then anticipate demand and place the right orders for raw materials with their own suppliers. The sales tools we have today are an outreach of supply chain management, dressed up to look like they’re to help the rep.

“On the surface it makes sense. But in practice, I’m unconvinced that an individual rep gets any value from these tools. In fact, I believe in most cases, they become an administrative overhead that keeps them away from customers.”

Read then points a finger squarely at what he calls the “elephant in the living room.”

He explains, “My team does a lot of sales re-engineering and training work with companies of all sizes. What we [have seen] is an alarming decrease in sales effectiveness, even before the recession. In 2004, it took 26 leads to win one sale. Last year reps were making 100 calls to win the same sale. Last year only 56% of salespeople hit their target. Managers say their three-month forecasts are 40% wrong. And in one study where the CEO of a business asked us to track how its sales force was

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spending its time, we found that administration of their sales tools (and internal meetings they didn't need to attend) were eating up 70% of their available selling time. We only have 220 days a year to sell in, so this is enormously detrimental to the revenue line."

Read says he believes it's time to reboot the technology that salespeople use.

The Real Value of Sales Technology

"Sales technology shouldn't be just about the rep putting data in. It should provide insight back. It should tell the rep what they're not doing, what they don't know, what's going to happen in the sale next based on trends across similar deals in the system, and how their activity and conversion levels compare to their peers and est practice.

"If I started my week and my sales tool told me how many calls I'm behind for the year; how many deals of a certain value I need to close; which prospects in my territory were most likely to want to talk about my product, based on pressures they're facing in their market; and the top three discussion points that serve as hot buttons to stimulate the sale. Now that's a tool I think more salespeople would get value from. If it also looked at my pipeline and gave me a calculation of which deals I'm most likely to win, and what other reps have done to close them faster, I could use that too. In specific competitive deals, if it gave me a snapshot of how qualified a deal is, how to get close to the right decision-makers and influencers, suggested some competitive strategies to follow and – even better – if it gave me a button to drop all these ideas into a task list in Outlook or similar, I could sell more. We all could.

"Most importantly, [psychological] studies prove rather conclusively that good salespeople are predominantly right-brained. The right brain governs verbal fluency (the gift of the gab), creativity and adaptation, and responds to colors, images and icons. The left brain is

about numbers, structure, logic, rows and columns. How is most sales technology designed? That's right: like an online spreadsheet. It's designed by left-brained engineers and sold to a right-brained audience. And that's why so many salespeople struggle with it. So for any sales tool to achieve real adoption, it needs to be about dashboards and icons that reveal insights you don't need a degree in math to interpret.

"To my mind, this is the type of sales intelligence that salespeople are looking for and can't find. I'll have it ready in about six months. And then maybe we can move forward as a profession with our own tools, instead of using tools handed down from marketers and engineers who never sold in a territory a day in their life."


Once the rep gains an audience with a customer, Read stresses the importance of being prepared to ask lots of questions. He maintains that there are three steps to effectively use this technique. It goes like this:

1. Engage the brain;
2. Open the mouth;
3. Listen.


What really helps here, he notes, "is a true curiosity and joy [for] learning about people and the companies they work in. Ninety percent of communication is non-verbal. It's in the vibe we give off and the way we turn discussions to serve us or to serve them. Customers can smell it when our only reason for listening to them is to twist the discussion onto our product. That's not a dialogue, that's entrapment, and customers see it for what it is.

Be Armed with Questions

"So my advice here is to go into every meeting with a fistful of questions that ask the customer's opinion about issues happening in their industry or company, which show you know what you're talking about. This type of opening might look like: 'Mr. Customer, that volcano in Iceland sure has grounded a lot of flights. I notice



Only when they admit they have a problem can they be truly ready to hear about your solution.



30% of your suppliers are from Europe and wonder to what extent you're having trouble supplying your own customers right about now, since you operate a just-in-time production policy and have no local warehousing of supplies? Is this topical and relevant? Does it tap a nerve? Will it get them talking? Oh yeah!

"Next, ask questions that escalate their sense of pain. We want them on the hook, over the coals, feeling the heat: 'So last quarter you shipped 2,000 products, and your revenue was \$2 million. How much of that is at risk this month because you can't get product in from your normal suppliers? [How many] customers aren't prepared to wait and are likely to switch to another supplier? How many of those are so loyal, they'll return to you next month after their new supplier has had time to love them up? What would this type of loss mean to your business?' Ouch. Let them talk. Get all their pain, anxiety or bravado on the table.

"[Then respond with] 'I believe we can help you retain all these customers and assure supply to them. If I can show you how to do that, would you give serious consideration to buying from me this month?' Zing!

"You ask questions designed to get their pain in the table, and then establish your relevance. Only then have you really earned the right to talk about yourself and your product or service line. Only when they admit they have a problem can they be truly ready to hear about your solution."

Rep as Solution Provider

The dialogue above touches on one of the most important roles (i.e., solution provider) the rep can and should play once he's gained that in-person meeting with a customer. According to Read, "If the rep is not doing a consultative call every time, what is he doing instead? Every call needs to be an opportunity to consult. But just the act of asking smart questions doesn't elevate you to trusted advisor status. That has to be earned, but can

be done surprisingly quickly. The key is to keep your product in your pocket, and do your homework on the customer. Get informed about their issues. Then ask questions designed to show you're interested in their business, their thought process, their challenges and goals. But don't just ask bluntly 'What are your goals for next year?' because you really should know that before getting face-to-face.

"I know some people will tell you it takes a long track record of supplying a customer before you can get into their inner circle. The people telling you that are probably the ones who never cracked this nut. The good news is you don't have to wait to be a trusted advisor. You can get there in a single call, and here's how: you add more value and make more sense than the person giving them their advice today. It's that simple."

Read, who participated in this interview with ASM while grounded in Greece by volcano dust earlier this year, continues, "Before Mount Enya-Falafel (hey, you pronounce it!) erupted in Iceland, I was in London to meet with a senior manager in a big project. He never met me before, and I knew nothing about him except what I could Google. He was project manager for a new initiative and was willing to listen to my pitch. And the last thing I did was pitch him. Instead, I asked questions about why they were doing this, why now, and what they did before that wasn't working for them.

"I shared examples of where I'd seen other customers face the same challenges. Now he saw me as a 'player.' I asked what he thought the solution should look like. Now I had his shopping list. Then, against every instinct we all have as salespeople, I resisted the urge to segue into my solution, even though it looked like the right time to do so. I kept my powder dry and asked, 'What will happen if you get this wrong? How will that be perceived?' Now I had his soul.

"From there, I simply shared insights about where other customers I knew had placed themselves in trouble with



REPRINTED FROM

agency sales[®] magazine

July 2010 • vol.40, no.07

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Don't go to sleep at the wheel. Continually look for ways to add value.



the wrong solution or the wrong approach to working with it. I gave him foresight into risks and ways around them that nobody else on his team had thought of yet. I showed him the different paths people normally take on projects of this type, and one by one showed these to be dead ends. In truth, these were all the options I knew my competitors offered.

“Within an hour of drawing on a pad of paper with him, we had designed what his solution needed to look like. It looked a lot like what I was offering, only not once had I talked about my product or service yet. I had to get him conceptually aligned [with] want what I sell.

“Then [he asked,] ‘Do you have anything like this?’ Now he was buying, and I didn’t need to be selling. Value was created in that office that hour. Now he had a level of direction and certainty that was lacking before. He cancelled the other vendor meetings. He had his solution. And since that day, this customer calls me a few times a week to bounce ideas around. I went from being a nobody to being a trusted advisor in one meeting. And so can you.”

What’s the Rep’s Value?

Finally, Read addresses the subject of the rep’s “value” to the customer. He agrees that every salesman will maintain he provides his customers with value. But the question remains how can a rep truly differentiate his value to the customer compared to his competition?


The author/consultant advises, “Keep treating them like they’re a prospect. Don’t go to sleep at the wheel. Continually look for ways to add value. Network across departments and look for new ways to contribute. Most importantly, keep tabs on what your product or service changes in their business. Did it really help them retain more customers, and what was that worth? Did it really help lift production and throughput, and by how much?

“Most executives I’ve talked to tell me that when they

switch suppliers, it’s not usually because of price or because the incumbent messed up, but because they spent money last year and just don’t know if they got a return on it. They feel like their manufacturers’ rep is guilty of a ‘sell-and-run’ violation because nobody went back to them after the sale was made to track, measure and report on what a good investment it was. To do this, you need to stay in touch more regularly than once a quarter.”

Read explains, “Value is also in the little things you do. The top-selling rep in one company I consulted to would spend every Friday morning reading the trade magazines and national press, and would photocopy and circle in red pen any article about their customer’s business, competition or market that he found. He’d then place a yellow sticky note on the article with some ideas that always began with ‘What if...’ and ended with an idea.

“He could have scanned and e-mailed this, but by putting it in an envelope and posting it or dropping it off on his way through town, he maintained a personal touch the executives appreciated. Most of the time his ideas didn’t rock their world, but that’s not the point. He showed he was in their corner, thinking about the world as they did. And sometimes he flagged something they didn’t know, and it was a home run.

“This rep always made it rain dollars, year in, year out, because he sought to add value before, during and after the sale, and this primed the pump for his next sale. This is how loyalty happens.” 

Nicholas Read is president of consulting firm SalesLabs (www.saleslabs.com) and co-author of *Selling to the C-Suite* (McGraw Hill, 2010). For more information, visit www.cxo-selling.com.