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January/February 2010 • \$5.00 [www.sellingpower.com](http://www.sellingpower.com)

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By Henry Canaday

# The ABCs of Selling Higher Up

How to approach, present, and  
sell to the C-level executive

Illustration by Janusz Kapusta/Corbis



## Selling higher up the food chain requires more than just walking to sell within a company, the more strategic you have to be in your

In certain sales situations, a rep can only close a sale by meeting with the top decision maker. In the post-2008 economic climate, many companies require approval from the top of the decision-making chain. Thus, it's not unusual these days for sales reps to find themselves in front of C-level customers, where long-lasting relationships can begin to develop.

"If you get buy-in at the top, the sale is far easier," summarizes sales consultant Sam Manfer. "Salespeople can make a sale without going to the top, but it is harder. The customer cajoles you on price. At the top you get follow-up and cross sales."

There are two absolute rules for selling to C-level customers: Do your homework, and have something important to say. But there are also lots of details to get right.

Prepare for the C-level customer before you visit. Use LinkedIn and other tools to build a network of colleagues who can help make referrals. For example, Tom Begg has links to 500 names in LinkedIn, has started 50 groups, and sends newsletters to group members. Many of these contacts have been useful; they are C-level execs or people who know them. "Don't be shy about asking for help," Begg advises.

Know exactly which C-level exec you need to speak to – CEO, CFO, COO, or other. Who has the most to gain or lose from what you are selling? To answer this question, a rep must know the informal process, apart from formal RFPs, the firm uses to make buying decisions.

"The informal process always trumps the formal one," notes Steve Bistriz, coauthor of *Selling to the C-Suite: What Every Executive Wants You to Know About Successfully Selling to the Top* (McGraw-Hill, 2009). He successfully bid for a major IT firm's business only because the key C-level exec stepped in at the end, overriding the purchasing agent's choice. "The relevant exec can change the rules," Bistriz summarizes.

You may learn this "relevant" executive's name from a low-level manager who warns you not to go over his head. "You must weigh the risk of jeopardizing that low-level relationship by seeking the higher decision maker with losing the deal because you did not go higher," Bistriz explains. "Salespeople must manage risk."

The biggest error is not doing enough homework. Bistriz urges reps to speak to lower-level managers first. Learn about the firm's industry, utilizing information from key customers and competitors, annual reports, CEO letters to shareholders, 10-K and 10-Q reports, and such services as OneSource. "Listen to the quarterly earnings call; stock analysts ask pretty good questions. Look for key initiatives and your solutions for these initiatives."

"Pick the brains of your network to learn what the exec is like and

what his issues and landmines are," Manfer urges. "Preparation develops confidence, and confidence makes you believable."

Monitor the prospect constantly, looking for gains, losses, and market movements. Nicholas Read, lead author of *Selling to the C-Suite*, says individual reps must often do all this research. "But if you have a team on the account, there must be a formal schedule and delegation of responsibility for gathering information."

Nearly 90 percent of the execs Read surveyed for his book said they would meet with a salesperson based on a recommendation from someone they know and respect from inside their company or business network. "Know the people they rely on internally, perhaps who are three levels below without title or rank but are true subject experts. These are the people who always stay, no matter the ebbs and flows. If these people recommend you, the exec will see you."

The best references are often C-level peers at other major corporations. "This shows you play at their level," says Jill Konrath, author of *Selling to Big Companies* (Kaplan Business, 2005). "If they get a reference from their peers, they have to pay attention."

Go for a C-level meeting early and with a big idea, or do not go at all. The top execs from 400 major corporations who Read surveyed told him that once an RFP hits the street, they are no longer involved.

"So see [C-level customers] very early to define [your solutions]," Read argues. "Don't meet with them in the middle of the sales cycle unless you can bring new insights, change the vision beyond the scope of the original, or reengineer it to be more effective. But if you have a better approach they will listen. Timing is everything."

Tom Begg finds the best time to call top execs is from 41 to 57 minutes past the hour. "If you call at 10 a.m. to 10:40 a.m. you will not get

through," he stresses. But even the best-timed calls are likely to require leaving a message. Make it succinct and persuasive. Follow up with a quick email, and then call again in three days. Keep a detailed record of every contact.

The first time you connect with the exec, you may have only three minutes to demonstrate why he or she should take a longer call or meeting. "You have to demonstrate some value to the exec, for example that you have sold the solution to the same industry," Bistriz argues.

You can go for a short telephone call first – say, 20 minutes long. If the call lasts longer, that is great. But be prepared to keep it short, and seek a face-to-face follow-up.

Konrath urges reps to sound like a colleague, not a salesperson. "Do not sound hopeful, saying you can see them anytime. Salespeople want to be accommodating, but C-level execs hear it dif-



## in the door and pitching product. The higher up you go thinking. Here are some steps that will help you climb that ladder.

ferently, like you are a lightweight. They book a month in advance and have an hour a month to spare. Do not sound like a peon. Sound like a busy person."

Remember, C-level execs are not interested in everything, so sometimes do not even try. "They are interested in what spans the enterprise and affects many business units," says Konrath.

She insists that top decision makers want to find solutions that serve their vision of the future – new ways of doing business, not disruptive technologies. "They are interested in new ideas, and

half-hour meeting is a good target. "If you get an hour, you know you hit a home run."

The meeting should end with specific goals and agreement on next steps and knowing to whom you should speak next. Show you are prepared by telling the exec which department you have worked with before, but let him or her suggest alternatives. Manfer argues that meetings should end with a commitment, an order, support for the project, a referral to another exec, or at least an agreement on what needs to be clarified at the next meeting.

## "At the top you get follow-up and cross sales"

they do not want to know about the mundane things that have been done ten times before."

Concentrate on the big points. "[Top execs] can get all the information on your company – its history, clients, and awards – on the Internet now," says Read. "They don't need that."

"Lots of people think 'consultative sales' means asking clever questions," Read observes. "No, it means outthinking line managers, identifying with the business, and seeing the missed opportunities when management is mired in old ways."

He recalls one rep who sent a list of 20 things wrong with a prospect company to the prospect's CEO. "The CEO's assistant called and said, 'You have some explaining to do.' But at a lunch meeting, the CEO told the rep he agreed with all her points and took her on as a consultant."

Read believes more reps should be capable of this risky but effective approach. "Salespeople have a broad view because they deal with competitors and the market. If they understand the business, they can be researchers for their clients."

Read sees a major improvement in the capabilities of top-level salespeople in the last 10 years, especially with their use of Internet information. "They can process information faster, keep their eyes and ears open, and become trusted advisors at the enterprise level."

A well-prepared rep should be prepared to tell a C-level exec what the future holds and what consequences future decisions will have on the exec's firm and recommend solutions. "Don't be afraid to be controversial. Tell this prospect why he or she may lose his or her job in five years," says Read.

It is not enough just to do research. You must then let top execs *know* you did the research. "Demonstrate that you have paid the price of admission," Konrath urges. "Tell them you did your homework, and then prove it by summarizing their core objectives for the next three to five years."

She urges sending a meeting agenda beforehand and thinks a

The top execs Read surveyed said they wanted to be pushed after meeting with salespeople. "Some salespeople are reluctant to push, but execs told us that if they don't have to do something, why did they waste their time on the meeting?"

Required follow-up should be immediate. Says Read, "You should have a 'next steps' template ready beforehand, then you can shoot it off on a personal device or as soon as you get back to the office, saying, 'Here are the steps.'"

Finally, return after the close and delivery to prove the value of your solution, urges Bistriz. "Reps almost never do this, and it is a missed opportunity." •

## mistakes

Here are some common mistakes salespeople make when trying to meet with C-level execs.

1. Not realizing you must get to the top at some point
2. Failing to develop relationships in the company to get to top-level execs
3. Trying to get a meeting by simply calling the exec's secretary
4. Going in so nervous you end up just telling the exec about your company
5. Going for an order instead of the relationship
6. Failing to maintain the C-level relationship once it's been developed

Source: Sam Manfer