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MAY 2010

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page 4**



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Two print guys sat in a bar after another long day in the printing industry. One considered himself to be the consummate sales professional. The other had a history in marketing management. After ordering a cocktail, the conversation got heated. The salesperson was pounding his chest and saying “nothing happens without a sale”. Meanwhile, the marketing guy countered with “Marketing is everything. If you don’t have market intelligence, you cannot create leads or offer the right products.”

The debate lasted well into the night and left each of them exhausted. One thing, however, was clear. If these two enthusiastic professionals could combine their powers, they would present a formidable team. The sales team needs good qualified leads and the support of a relentless marketing process. In turn, marketing needs highly evolved salespeople who can create value and provide great insight. Unfortunately, most companies lack the proper sales and marketing alignment resulting in a long and difficult sales journey.

According to Nic Read, author of *Selling to the C-Suite: What Every Executive Should Know About Successfully Selling to the Top*, “Buying has already changed. If marketing and sales are to catch up, there’s no time to lose. When you get questionable prospects from marketing and turn them into bona fide buyers, and when Web sites are redesigned to give away less of the information that salespeople should be delivering in person, your company will redefine the sales forces as a relevant player at the C-suite.”

Along with co-author Stephen Bistriz, Read highlights the idea that a brave new world exists for sales and marketing and gaining access to the C-level executives will take a new approach. Their research depicts a world where marketing provides overwhelming information on the Web, which leads to the commoditization of sales people. Meanwhile, many salespeople find themselves defined as value communicators rather than value creators.

Read explains the idea of selling to the C-suite first surfaced about 14 years ago with the invention of the internet. Companies have become more knowledgeable and many of them no longer valued the sales person as a communicator. All the information on a product was right at their finger tips. Instead, organizations wanted the sales reps to bring in an outside view and out think their own executives.

As part of their thorough research, Read and Bistriz discovered a compelling theme. “It turns out that C-level execs actually do want sales reps calling on them”, states Read. As time evolved, it is still the same guiding principle. He continues, “Execs look for three main things from suppliers who want to gain access; loyalty, knowledge, and credibility. Not just knowledge on the workings of the product, but how outside products can bring outside thoughts.”

The questions that remain in the new landscape are how to access the c-suite, how to establish credibility, and how to create value. As Neil Rackham, author of SPIN selling, put it over 10 years ago, "Information-based selling, the talking brochure selling, is just going to die out because you can't afford it when it's more costly and less convenient, and until the internet came along you had to have it because you had no alternative." When describing the feedback from a customer who was the recipient of excellent sales calls, Rackham says "the sales people changed the way I thought about my problems. I did something very differently as a result of talking to them." In other words, the new salesperson needs to come in as an equal to the c-suite executives.

Dale Rothenberger, Vice President of The Winters Group and Associates, concurs with Read. "You need to prepare yourself by focusing on how the executive views the world from his/her chair. In turn, they will not want to engage until you have the details of their view." Rothenberger believes that preparation is critical to your success. "Many of us in print sales think that preparation is a nuisance. We always seem to look for a shortcut. However, the research and knowledge resources are critical for the conversation with the CMO."

Much of the research needed to connect with the C-suite is at your disposal. Read explains how to utilize search engines to do this; "type in key words such as plan, goal, strategy, along with the execs name. Research what kind of articles he has been quoted in and everywhere the exec is mentioned. This will give you a clue to the direction they may be going."

Another approach is the bottom up. "Cold calling the executive typically has a 4% return rate. If the reps spend more time contacting people who are at their own level or down they will have more success," Read explains. Imagine connecting with one of the lower level managers by saying "I am interested in talking to you about some ideas we can collaborate on to present to your CMO. I see that you are initiating a new project and I would like to give you some thoughts on maximizing the launch."

If you have done your research correctly, and have articulated the solutions explicitly, you will have created a tremendous ally. Internal referrals are always more trustworthy and they carry much more weight. Read continues "Do your homework first and come out with guns blazing as you are the specialist. The execs want advice. They want sales people to make the types of calls that they can write checks for because of its value."

Rothenberger, who specializes in grooming clients for the first impression, talks passionately about avoiding roadblocks when pursuing the C-suite. "The challenges today are the same as they have always been. Getting through the gatekeepers and getting the executive on the phone will always be a challenge." Rothenberger, continues "The daily life of a CMO is hectic and they are focused on how their prospect and customers want to be communicated with. Your goal is to create a dialogue on how he can improve ROI (Return on Investment) and increase his channels of communication."

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More and more print owners and presidents are requiring their sales forces with building relationships with C-level executives. Read and Bistriz have narrowed it down to six critical steps in gaining their support.

1. Identify the relevant executive. Simply ask yourself who stands to gain the most from the project or product solution. A revamped marketing process should focus on finding these leads and making sure they are real.
2. Determine the best approach to get to the relevant executive. As an example, Rothenberger touts the value of using statistics to gain credibility. By quoting relevant facts or feedback from the prospects clients, you can create a persona of understanding. Statistics give you insight and position you for a much more relevant discussion. Read adds "Referrals from people outside of the organization would yield a meeting approximately 50 percent of the time."

3. Perform the appropriate research before that critical first meeting with an executive. Learn about the client's industry, the company, and the executive.
4. Conduct an effective first meeting with the client executive. According to Read, the conversation should be focused on a long term relationship. Letting go of the need to sell something in the short term will allow you to focus on validating your research and clarifying their needs. In addition, by accepting that the relationship needs time, you open yourself up to idea sharing and brainstorming
5. Demonstrate integrity and capability in subsequent meetings so that the executive perceives you as a trusted advisor. Insight and trust position you as a value creator rather than someone who talks about the new digital press you just added to the shop.
6. Consistently communicate your value to the executive. As the conversation flows, the ability to communicate your value and your company's value should flow naturally.

Aligning sales and marketing is not just an issue for our two printing professionals. They now realize that their C-suite targets are going through the very same debate. If they can work together they can begin the process of engaging the C-level and aid them in aligning their own sales and marketing organizations. With our marketing hero focused on improving the quality of leads and

providing adequate research, our sales hero will be positioned properly to make a peer to peer sale.

According to Rothernberger, "A good bit of selling to the C-suite comes from a personality that is suitable to communicate at that level. However, skills can be learned and information can be acquired to enhance the chance for success". With a new found enthusiasm for working closely together, our two heroes raised their glasses and toasted their impending success in courting the C-suite. ■



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CANVAS with **MMI Solutions**

When: Thursday, May 13th

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