

Forbes

How To Sell To The C-Suite

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A small proportion of salespeople drive the lion's share of results. What do these super reps do differently, and can you bottle it?

Selling to the C-Suite (McGraw Hill, 2010) offers some compelling answers. The book is based on the world's largest study into executive buying behavior. It is based on empirical data—not anecdotes—collected from interviews with 527 executives.

One huge revelation: Executives *want* to be called on. They need fresh ideas from outside their companies. And they want to get involved in the buying process when a problem or opportunity is first identified.

If a solution can't be found internally, executives research their options. For salespeople, this means these decision-makers already know what you do, what your customers say about you and how you stack up with competitors—even before you set up that sales call. Implication for marketers: Your Web sites better talk specifically about problems you've solved, not just spit out product specs. Implication for sellers: If you're waiting for an invitation to bid, you're too late. At best you might get a shot at a strictly by-the-numbers, commodity-flavored sale with a purchasing agent whose single purpose in life is to whittle down the price.

But this picture isn't as grim as it appears, said the executives in the study, first led in 1994 by Target Marketing Systems in Atlanta, in conjunction with Hewlett-Packard and the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina. (SalesLabs, my firm, later expanded the study to include executives in Asia and Australia.) The executives were interviewed for up to 90 minutes by students who were themselves sales managers, senior directors and researchers completing their MBAs.

Here are five things executives say they are looking for from those who call on them:

Internal recommendations. Cold calling may land you a meeting 5% of the time. Get the ears of people close to an executive ("influencers," in the sales trade) who might put in a good word for you, and the success rate on landing that meeting jumps to 80%.

Bias toward action. Executives expect salespeople to understand their business goals and be trusted to make things happen. Salespeople who say they must check with their managers before cutting a deal will lack credibility with executive customers.

Ability to speak their language. Successful salespeople are fluent in their customer's industry, its trends, its ecosystem, and painful as it may be, even its jargon. Salespeople who can only talk about their company and their product—no matter how enthusiastically—rarely visit the C-suite twice.

Trust. The saying "people buy from people they like" remains true as ever, but executives report that they prefer to deal with people they trust. That means salespeople not only have to demonstrate expertise, but the guts to challenge an executive's current thinking.

Accountability. For all the up-front selling to establish a value proposition, few sellers ever return to the scene of the crime to measure the results of the product or service they delivered. Those that do establish the kind of credibility they'll need to snag repeat business.

Executives caution that too many sellers think it's a rite of passage to sell to the top. It's not. You can win business without executive involvement if you connect with the right players. But if you do find yourself in the C suite, be ready to take your swings.

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