

Selling to the Executive Suite™

By Brad Stribling

No one needs to tell you that it's become brutally competitive in the market. Not so long ago, there were jokes and high-fives as your sales force gathered for a sales meeting at the home office. Now, those meetings have the look and feel of a scene from *Glengarry Glen Ross*. It's been so long since they've sold anything that they're wondering if they've forgotten how. And so are you. For many, anxiety has turned to depression and then, into desperation. Their sense of futility became nearly palpable and, then, contagious. You're supposed to be the one with the answers that can turn their attitudes and results around. But your business card probably says, "VP of Sales" not "Miracle Worker."

This tough economy is giving every business the same difficulties, right? But that's little comfort when it's *your* revenue line that looks like a design for the downhill slalom. Your top producers are suddenly not making their numbers. Many have been calling on the same department heads for so long, they're almost family. Unfortunately, the message they're getting from the kin has the same ring from all corners. There's a spending freeze in place that shows no sign of ending. There is no money in the current budget for any type of expenditure, let alone capital investments.

The department heads that have been rewarding your reps' hard work with orders now seem powerless to take the cap off their pens, let alone sign a purchase order. They're saying that decisions that were unilaterally theirs now require committee meetings and sign-off from several layers of management. Your people are still dutifully marching off to fight the good fight. They're making the same number of calls with the same buyers that have always let them leave their customer's office, waving orders like a victory flag. Now, they stumble to their cars in frustration, wondering what went wrong. Some are fantasizing about an unscheduled root canal rather than facing the next meeting with you to report the abysmal results yet, again.

You're watching *MSNBC* every night, hearing that the economy seems to be turning around. OK, that means sales will improve. But if sales people wait around for that to filter down from the top floor to the purchasing department, they may be too late to insure that your company gets the orders when the freeze is lifted. And you've got a sales forecast due for the coming year. Impossible! With your sales reps telling you there's no allocation for historical spending, let alone new acquisitions, you've got about as much chance of putting meaningful numbers together as winning the darts tournament with a blindfold.

The problem has been analyzed until you're ready to slit your wrists with the piles of unused order forms. What possible suggestion can you give the sales force that will break through the wall they keep hitting? They've got to maintain a good relationship with the department head as they start **calling on the boss!** Senior executives don't *have* budgets, they *make* them. Your sales people have to start talking to the very highest management levels.

Account representatives must learn to think like corporate executives in order to sell to them. And let me tell you right up-front, this environment is one that does not suffer fools gladly. You simply can't expect to send your sales people after the head honcho using the same skill set that worked in the purchasing department. If you do, they'll be making the fastest sales calls of their careers.

Most senior executives have worked long and hard to be sitting in the corner office. They now work on a conceptual level. Day-to-day tasks are delegated. Their skills lie in analyzing data quickly and, just as quickly, reaching decisions. Their time is at a premium, so they've got to see a benefit for granting an appointment. Even with a spectacular call, your sales people will still be passed down through the organization to the same buyers whose hands have been tied. But a favorable recommendation from the boss will make their inability to place an order evaporate.

Let me ask you to consider how well your sales people will handle the 4 P's that are crucial to Selling to the Executive Suite™.

Profiling

The first step in approaching and selling executives is Profiling. Thanks to the Internet, most of your sales executives have stacks of file folders filled with facts. Unless they can correctly analyze those facts, they'll have loads of data with very little insight. When they gain the ability to truly understand their customer's business, they can quickly describe the benefits of dealing with your company to fill a specific need. They should become familiar with your account's vision, financial metrics, language and core competencies. There are only so many slots in the senior executive's busy calendar and getting one must be earned.

Penetrating

The second "P" is Penetrating. Creative and powerful barriers have been erected to deflect the onslaught of solicitors that besiege your customer on a daily basis. Proper use of e-mail, voice mail or other correspondence is crucial, both with the executive and the dreaded gatekeepers. Receptionists and executive assistants are hired to insulate corporate management from unwanted distractions. They have to be approached and sold in a much different way to believe that you're carrying the Holy Grail rather than the usual cart of donkey dung. Up-front receptionists exist to move calls to the correct place in the organization. They're armed with the knowledge to direct you to the right set of ears. When you've reached the executive assistant, your goal is to provide them with a compelling reason to open the door to the inner sanctum instead of barring it like a pit bull in an Armani suit.

When your sales executives have cleared these formidable obstacles, they need to know what to expect from a great meeting with a senior executive. Everybody gets sent down from the Executive Suite. It's not whether they'll be sent down, it's the way in which they're sent down that will determine how successful they'll be.

Preparing

Preparing with the right material in a tightly organized fashion is next. While gathering the beautifully colored and packaged information, your executive sales force needs to remember that their best tool requires no folder or video capability. Thorough knowledge of their customer will allow your sales people to ask questions and keep quiet! In most situations, the person doing most of the talking is the one that's out of control. Listening to what the senior executive tells them and adjusting their pitch to meet his or her needs will be more effective than the glossiest brochure or most clever PowerPoint presentation.

Presenting

Presenting your product or services should follow an old philosophy with a slightly new twist—Keep It Succinct. Senior executives rarely discuss price and are really put off with presentations that give them a lot of information they care nothing about. Ask knowledgeable questions and be quiet. Many potential customers will tell you exactly what you need to sell them, though often in the form of an objection. Handling these road blocks artfully by demonstrating a clear benefit to their organization will get your reps passed down through the organization with a pat on their back instead of a kick in their seat. Remember, the ultimate goal when **Selling to the Executive Suite**™ is positive Sponsorship.

Don't be fooled. Implementing a new way of doing business will be a difficult transition for your sales staff. Some of your sales people may be unable or unwilling to make the necessary changes, so brace yourself for some turnover. Most, though, are completely capable and it's your responsibility to give them the new tools they'll need to succeed. Teaching them how to reach new levels of decision making that can dramatically increase sales just might warrant the title "Miracle Worker" on your business card.

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