

Executive White Paper
Getting to C-Level:
12 Ground Breaking Sales Strategies
to Penetrate the C-Suite



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PRODUCTIVITY TRAINING FOR SALES AND SALES MANAGEMENT

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Getting To C-Level: 12 Ground Breaking Sales Strategies To Penetrate Into The C-Suite

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Selling to the C-Suite has the highest potential opportunities, but it also has the biggest challenges. These are the leaders of the company, and they have not achieved this level of success by being unable to make a quick decision, or without having a full understanding of the choices they make.

However, the C-Suite is also a group of people that are innovative and are actively looking for ways to make their companies more efficient, more profitable and more productive. Selling to these high-level professionals starts with addressing these needs, as well as knowing the challenges they face, and then providing the solution.

To help sales professionals, there are twelve strategies to use to get into the C-Suite, to engage the executives, and then to create the environment to make a sale. By utilizing these techniques, some which are completed well in advance of the meeting, the results will be noticeable, doors will open, and then the rest is up to you.

1. Research the Company

One of the most common mistakes sales professionals make is to use a cookie cutter approach to selling to upper-level executives, who are also known today as CXOs. These are professionals that know a sales pitch when they hear one, and they are quickly turned off of these routine types of generalized approaches.

When a sales professional is able to talk about actual facts of the company's performance, including trends in sales, changes in production or manufacturing, options for niche growth it shows both initiative as well as personalization.

Instead of talking about industry trends in general, target the information to company specifics. One important consideration for sales professionals marketing to this level is described by Matt Dixon of CEB (Corporate Executive Board) as being "the Challengers".



This means going into the meeting having a good understanding of what the C-suite is facing in the future and marketing and challenging the CXOs to think outside of the box for solutions. This only works when you know the company and know what is really going on in the industry at a deeper level than just skimming a few articles in business magazines.

Remember that social media opens a window into any industry through LinkedIn Groups, forums, discussion boards, reviewing White Papers and even reading blogs. The more informed you are about the executive, the company and the industry you are the more likely you will have a productive meeting that isn't cut short by an executive who doesn't want to listen to a sales pitch that is not related to their needs and challenges.

2. Be Proactive and Don't Wait

A very big mistake that sales professionals marketing to the C-Suite are prone to make is to wait until there is an evident or obvious need for a product or service. By the time the company has identified a problem, they are already looking for solutions, which means they are actively contacting vendors.

In researching a company and studying trends in the industry, you will get a feel for the challenges a company is facing, that the executives are aware may be pending, or that is anticipated in the future.

By meeting with executives proactively, or pre-emptively, you have an amazing opportunity to get your foot in the door before the competition. Not only is this important to make your product or service stand out as the solution, but there are some advantages to being the first sales person to talk to the decision makers.

Some interesting facts to consider in recent studies on the effectiveness of being the first sales professional to contact a buyer at any level in an organization include:

- According to a survey by Inside Sales.Com half of all companies that make a purchase buy from the first vendor that offered the product or service.
- Almost three-quarters of those vendors that first speak to an executive and present a plan and vision for their product or service that addresses a need will close the deal.
- The Sales Benchmark Index reports that there is a 56% chance to be more



likely at making a sale if the sales professional makes the initial contact before the buyer starts to actively seek a vendor.

Making those meetings to talk to executives about what they will need, not what they need right now, is a critical part in not only making this sale but in making future sales.

3. Make it a Conversation

Hand-in-hand with the research on the company is the need to come up with a compelling way to connect on a human and personal level with those executives in the C-suite.

They hear data, points, facts, figures and problems all day. They are expected to come up with solutions, make decisions that drive profits, and avoid making any mistakes in the thousands and once choices they make.

By taking the sales meeting out of the "meeting" model and connecting on a personal yet professional level as a partner in helping with challenges, you create a meaningful connection. Having a story to tell, not a rambling or irrelevant story but a meaningful, understandable story about how other CEOs and C-suite professionals were able to resolve issues with your product or service is critical. It has to be natural and not a hard sell, more like content marketing but presented orally in the flow of conversation.

According to Ago Cluytens, writing for the RAIN Selling Blog, one simple way to create a narrative that is similar to what the company is experiencing is to make some calls before the meeting. Assistants, company public relationship professionals and even industry magazines can provide surprising insight into what needs exist within the company.

Do some online research and find out if the executive has an area of expertise or passion, make the effort to discover if they are active on LinkedIn or other social media sites and learn what they are talking about. Even industry publication can be helpful options in finding conversation starters and personalizing the discussion to the executive across the table.

4. Have Questions Planned in Advance

Through completing all the work in steps above, you should be able to plan in



advance, a series of thought-provoking and challenging questions for the executive based on the information you have available.

These questions need to be carefully crafted to be relevant, at a deep enough level to not sound condescending or uninformed, but they also have to have a goal or an objective in bringing the executive around to seeing how your product or service is of value.

One of the most important skills for sales professionals, particularly when marketing to decisions makers and executives, is to be able to ask open-ended questions that are relevant and don't end up seeming like a probe.

Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with a "yes" or a "no" or a simple one sentence response. They create an environment for the individual providing the answer to give you a vast wealth of information.

For example, a closed question may be along the lines of, "What is the rate of production increase that is essential for your business's growth?" While this will get an answer, it will probably just be a general number.

A better option would be to ask, "What would you have to do to boost productivity to a level that would create the growth you envision for your company?" This is going to provide much more information, and more ways to create answers to the needs with your products or services.

According to Tom Williams and Tom Saine of Strategic Dynamics, highly productive sellers will have between 8 and 12 questions prepared in advance of a meeting. These questions create what these authors call the "aha moment" for the buyer, allowing the executive to see just how your product or service provides a solution.

5. Have Confidence and Show Knowledge

While showing respect and deference to the C-Suite is always a professional courtesy, it is also important to be seen as knowledgeable, professional and as a peer in addressing the challenges that the product or service you are selling is going to resolve.

Individuals at executive levels don't want to be the exclusive problem-solvers, but rather they want to form partnerships with sales professionals and vendors that can



work with them to resolve the unique challenges their business is facing.

By having the ability to walk into a room and be seen as this type of resource and expert, rather than as a person trying to sell something, you have already created a mindset that you are offering tried and tested solutions, and that you, and your company, have the ability to continue to do so.

The next step is also to have something new to bring to the table. There is no point in coming into an executive meeting and not being able to have ideas to share that are innovative and not a rehash of other concepts. You may also want to get involved in the specific industry in writing your own blogs, articles and content that is also published on the web. The exposure will help in name recognition, even if the executive does a quick online search.

A good example of this ability to show experience and knowledge with new and innovative ideas is discussed by Dr. Stephen J. Bistriz in his book, "Selling to the C-Suite." In one example, he recalls in 1995 hearing from an executive from Hewlett-Packard that the executive often met with sales professionals to hear about solutions being used across the industry in companies facing similar challenges. This is not about providing details, but providing general concepts that can then be worked to accommodate the needs of the company.

6. Know the Lingo

It is one thing to come across as an expert, have the knowledge of your products or services and also have a good grasp of the industry trends, but it is another to have a good understanding of the lingo or jargon used in that particular industry.

There is nothing that will break down a conversation or create a less than professional presentation than having to ask, or even worse trying to guess, at the specifics of the terms used in the conversation.

This is why it is so essential to do your research and to have the background to be able to sell to the C-Suite. These are often people with decades of time spent in a particular industry, and they know it literally from the ground floor to the top floor offices.

The internet makes it easier to learn about the basics of whatever technology or science is behind the company, but this is also where networking and getting on social media and joining professional groups has a very real advantage. Knowing the language and being genuine about your experience and knowledge is critical in



building trust and in verifying your credentials as a source of information and ideas specific to their business and not just to your products.

Information provided by Corporate Visions, a B2B marketing company, indicates that about 24% of the sales people executives meet with understand their business on a deep enough level to provide ideas and innovative solutions. Of those same sales people, executives report that about 88% seemed very knowledgeable about what they were trying to sell, but not how they could connect their products to the company's business.

7. Target the C-Suite Executive with the Greatest Influence

Not all C-Suite executives have the same interests, problems or passions. Finding and targeting the one professional who is going to have the biggest incentive to use your product or service is critical to getting a meeting and making a sale.

One of the most ineffective options is to plan a meeting with an executive who has no interest or influence in the product or service you are selling. If you are targeting the bottom line, seek out the CFO, if you want to sell software that offers increased security or compliance, talk to the Chief Information Officer and so on.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that there are approximately 12,467,500 individuals working as C-Suite executives in 2014, with that number increasing by approximately 6% per year. Finding the right executive at a company is critical to not only getting a meeting but then preparing your information, questions and presentations to close the deal.

In a study by Miller Heiman involving 23,000 C-suite executives, over 65% reported that they were "actively engaged" in the sales process of their companies. This means that they are sales professionals or have a sales background and knowledge, and they know if they are the person that should make a particular decision.

These professionals will want data, evidence and information, and they are also more likely to negatively view a sales professional who is vague, misleading or is using obvious "sales tactics" during the initial meeting. While you may have to deliver negative or even unwelcome information the executive doesn't necessarily want to hear, being straightforward and clear will further make your case as a trusted resource and knowledgeable individual that is speaking to their area of the C-Suite.



8. Make a Connection

Most of the people that are in the C-Suite are bombarded by sales calls, mostly cold calls, on an ongoing basis. One way to create more of a personal connection before you begin to call to ask for a meeting is to connect with the executive through social media, business networking events, or through a referral from another top executive you have a good relationship with.

This is important for several reasons. First, it creates that personal connection without sales being the motive from the potential buyer's perspective, at least in those informal meetings. It is critical to keep these meetings focused on other topics than sales, as this can actually be highly counterproductive.

Don't try to connect through email, this is just the same as a cold call. In a Fortune Magazine article from 2012, it was found that approximately 28% of the average person's workday is spent on emails, and that equates to approximately 147 messages per day. Executives are only answering emails from people they know, and general sales emails are not going to be a priority.

The reason that a personal connection is important is not just because of the ability to get into the C-Suite easier, it also translates into an actual increase in sales. In recent surveys by LinkedIn it was found that when a sales professional is introduced to a sales professional by a trusted peer there is a five times greater chance that the buyer will engage with the sales professional.

Additionally, the Sales Benchmark Index reports that when questioned, 73% of executives would rather work with a sales person that is introduced by a person they know, which makes that time spent social networking on professional sites like LinkedIn a very valuable aspect to C-Suite marketing and meetings.

To further this Dr. Bistriz, in his research for the book "Selling to the C-Suite" completed interviews and studies with over 500 current executives. He found that when contemplating a major purchase 16% would always meet with a sales professional if a peer from inside the company made a referral, and 68% would "usually" meet with the sales professional. This compares to the same question about outside referrals which dropped in half to 8% of CXOs saying always and 36% saying usually to these types of meetings.

Interestingly the two options that received the greatest percentage of "never" answers on the survey were letters followed by a direct call, with 36% of the time resulting in never scheduling a meeting and a full 44% reporting never from a



direct call from the sales person.

9. Consider the Other Players

While a CEO, CFO, COO or other C-Suite executives have a lot of influence and may have final say in the decision to make a purchase, they are rarely the only decision-maker involved.

It is worth the time and effort to find out the next direct level of professionals in the company, at the very least their titles and names, and ask to have the opportunity to meet with these individuals for further discussion.

This is a great way to learn from the C-Suite executive what the long term goals are for the company, and then have the time to plan strategically to address those needs in a concrete way with the people that are more involved in the daily operation of the company.

Asking for a referral to those individuals, or knowing who they are if they are called into your meeting, allows you to have the ability to realize who is in the room and how to structure your meeting to address their needs as well.

10. Avoid Rushing a Sales Pitch

It is not effective, nor productive, to jump too quickly into a sales pitch. When the questioning and the conversation is flowing, avoid the temptation to jump in and the first opportunity and try to force the issue of bringing the conversation around to what you want to accomplish.

Having the opportunity to listen to the executive and to get a more comprehensive understanding of the needs and challenges they are facing is an accomplishment on its own. By turning a great conversation and connection into a buyer and seller dynamic can turn off an executive and send a message that they weren't being heard.

There will be a natural point in the conversation when the time is right to start making suggestions and providing ideas for solutions that are based on the products or services you are marketing. This timing is a matter of being actively engaged in the conversation, listening and responding to the executive, and recognizing when they are asking for information, ideas or knowledge.



With the right types of open-ended questions, you will find that curiosity builds about your ideas, your solutions and how your product or service can fill that need. A key turning point is when the executive starts questioning you and giving you the floor to share ideas and insight.

11. Know your Options

While there may be the need for others involved in the meeting or even for a follow-up meeting, you may also find that the executive, if you have been providing a promising solution to a problem, is ready to start talking about a deal.

This is also an important part of the pre-planning for your meeting. Having an idea of what you can do and what you cannot do with regards to negotiating the sale is going to be a big factor.

While the executive will reasonably expect that there will need to be approval for the deal, they don't have the time, nor the patience, to sit through endless negotiations on your end. This can lead to frustration and even turn a promising deal into a quick end of the meeting handshake if there are too many delays or the inability to get answers and provide compromises to seal the deal.

Having this information available before going into the meeting will avoid this type of problem at the end that can result in turning a deal into just another possibility.

12. Have the Next Step

It is important to have a plan and a next actionable step to take with the executive in ensuring your solutions and ideas are linked to your products and services.

For example, if you discuss an idea and brainstorm how this could be modified for the company, your next actionable step could be to meet with the appropriate professionals, probably an upper or mid-level manager, to delve deeper into the issue.

If you do receive a commitment from the executive, ask for a commitment on the next step. This could be a follow-up phone call, or meeting, or a presentation of a proposal. Be specific and give dates, get names and have all the information you need to keep the project on track and moving along to closure.

Getting to the C-Suite is really about planning in advance and making connections. It is also about preparing for the meeting and knowing the industry, the specific challenges or needs the individual and company is facing, as well how the products



or services you are marketing can address those needs.

It isn't always easy to sell to executives, and it does have challenges. However, it is the most effective option for B2B sales and in getting the information about products and services in front of the decision makers and those capable of giving approval to moving forward in partnership with your company.

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