



Selling the Organization:

Network your accounts – and KEEP networking!

- Jim Lewis, Founder & President, Princeton Sales Partners, LLC

Several years ago I received an urgent call from one of my top performing sales executives regarding one of our long time “Fortune 500” customers. Our “champion” at the account had just accepted a new position at another company. The problem was that the department that our champion managed, which represented the lion’s share of work for that company, had been merged with another department – managed by what my sales executive described as an adversary. As CEO, I received a couple of these calls a year. “Would I call the Vice President of Manufacturing and talk to him?” The hope of the sales executives was that I would sprinkle pixie dust on the account and everything would be better. As you know, it just doesn’t work that way and we eventually lost the account. These situations frustrated me the most because we had plenty of opportunities to secure our position with the customer but we failed to act.

We had failed in a couple of important aspects.

First, we hadn’t utilized our relationship with the champion to gain access to higher levels in the organization. Our sales executive had an excellent relationship with the champion and relied on that person for all the planning and budgeting of the work we were to perform. We received 100% of the work from that department. The account was predictable and our work for them was first class. One could see that there was a lack of incentive to spend more time on developing the account.

In hindsight, we should have used our relationship with the champion to meet and understand the business issues driving the company at higher levels of management. After each conversation we should have sent a follow up letter summarizing our conversation. Using the letter as script it would be easy for me to have a focused and valuable conversation with that VP or manufacturing; something we could have easily done on the phone. More often than not, those conversations have led to other introductions including with other CEO's. Now, when that call from the sales executive came in I would have a *prior* contact with the executives based on business issues that we have discussed. Then, making the call to ask how we could help in the transition of the work between the departments would be far more effective.

The other thing we failed to do is to understand why we had an adversary in the other department. People buy from people who empower them. As I later learned there was an incident that predated both me and the sales executive that left a negative impression on the other department managers. What's worse is that we never spent the time to uncover this and seek an opportunity to diagnose other business issues that we could address. If there is an adversary in the account, even if they are not in the direct line of your relationship with the company, I believe it is critically important to try to convert or neutralize these situations. One of the best ways to do this is to meet and to include other supporters in the meeting, especially a higher level executive. This helps keep the meeting focused on business issues and more importantly helps ensure that the contents of the meeting are not misrepresented later.

Calling high and getting in – but don't forget about everyone else!

Every selling situation is different although occasionally you will see some patterns repeat. Don't forget though, everyone sees themselves as unique so although the situation may seem similar, all the other factors most likely are not. TO prove that we're all human let me share with you a situation that occurred to me when I was starting my own consulting business. I received a call from the assistant to the CEO of a small

technology company in the area asking if I could schedule time for a call with the CEO. Wouldn't you LOVE to get this kind of call? After the initial diagnosis over the phone a face-to-face meeting was scheduled at the prospects offices. During that meeting the CEO decided that the company would use Jim's services and he was instructed to contact the regional managers to begin the implementation. That is where the whole project began to slow down. I contacted the regional directors and after a very slow sequence of voicemails and emails we finally setup a shortened version of the course so that the managers could review the program prior to field rollout. We conducted the 2-day session – and then nothing happened. My phone calls were not returned nor were emails. Eventually, I received an email from the CEO that explained that they had decided to go with another vendor whose service was more appropriate for their business. Ouch!

Working across the organization

I did find out who the other vendor was and knowing their products and services concluded that I had not done my job. I was outsold. This also highlighted to me that buyers will not necessarily tell the true reason you lost. Blaming it on the product, rather than you keeps everything cordial. I had assumed that the regional directors were on board with the roll out plan. In fact, they were not. I had never taken the time to find out what their business issues were, what their goals were and what factors would impact the successful implementation of the project. I had assumed that since the CEO had “decided” to move forward that the rest of the organization was in agreement. It's even quickly likely that the managers were hostile toward the idea because the CEO had decided without their full involvement or participation in the decision.

Fresh from that humbling experience I vowed never to let it happen again. On the very next opportunity I negotiated access to the entire management organization as part of my diagnostic step of assessing the needs and want of the company. Yes, I went overboard! This company also happened to be small so that task was manageable. Right away I set off to conduct the interviews. What I discovered very quickly was that

each manager had a very different perspective on the current state of the company and their challenges. I took the time to understand and document these concerns and to ask each manager what capabilities they would need to address the problems and to achieve their goals.

A week later I called the CEO to report my progress. He told me that if we didn't move forward with the program he would have a mutiny on his hands! Through my dialog with the managers they had each become empowered to see how they could improve the business and therefore both collectively and individually they had decided. There was never a formal buying committee, there was no long evaluation period – it just made sense to them.

We hear and read a lot about “buying committees” and how getting in front of them is a critical success factor. While that is true, I want to point out that not all companies have formal committees and some don't have committees at all. Whether it's a large or small company decisions at all level get made in a “communal” fashion. That is, there is a community in the organization that has a style of decision making. And whether that is democratic or dictatorial, reaching and communicating with the individual members is the best way of increasing your chances of winning the account.

Here are three reasons for networking your accounts:

1. The more need you uncover, the better your chances of success?

Everyone may not have the identical goal or benefit in mind by the implementation of your product or service. The needs and wants of the constituents in an account are going to vary as widely as the people. By helping companies implement sales methodologies you may find that the benefit for the CFO is more accurate forecasting while the benefit for the Sales VP may be a need to shorten the ramp up time for new hires and to increase top line revenue. Only by diagnosing the specific needs for each participant can you uncover their primary goal. After each conversation we recommend

that a follow up letter be sent that summarizes that discussion. This provides you a means of confirming that your understanding is accurate and it provides the buyer a well organized summary of the conversation. The more people feel part of the evaluation process and the more people who are part of the process, the more likely your capabilities will be a match for their needs.

2. The more people you can get involved the more likely the results will be a larger payback.

Each manager and executive in the company has a personal business goals that they are striving to achieve. There is a value to be gained by achieving those goals and it is your task to uncover that value. This can only be achieved by asking “number” questions during the interview process. How much? How often? What does it cost? For many sales people this is the area that needs the most improvement. It is easier to reach a conceptual agreement with a potential buyer on how your capabilities will help them. However, it takes time and persistence to dig out the specific numbers that are going to drive the business case to spend money with your company. Be patient and take the time to find and document what it is costing them to conduct “business as usual”.

3. Gaining access to others helps avoid being part of the vendor roulette.

If you are not column “A” then the risk of being second choice is much greater. By negotiating access to others in the organization you should be able to gain an understanding of the organization buying influences. That is, “Who has the power to decide?” It is not uncommon for several different people to work with different vendors in order to evaluate and negotiate the best contract. By meeting others in the company you can triangulate on who is the decision maker(s). Remember, each conversation

should be documented with a letter followed by a conversation to confirm that your understanding of their situation is correct.

If you can't get access to others in the organizations this is a strong indication that you are not first in the race (column "A"). I would ask myself, "Are they unable or unwilling?" If they are unable then you may be calling too low in the organization. If they are unwilling, then you may decide not to play. Calling above or around your unwilling buyer also has certain risks but, I believe that if your chance of success was already low, give it a try. By being proactive you may be able to change the odds.

In summary,

1. Anticipate and expect organizational changes and plan for them. Whether you are in a new sales situation or working with an existing customer, don't get complacent. Keep networking.
2. If you meet adversaries, find out why and then convert or neutralize them
3. Use your existing relationships to expand your reach inside the account both vertically and horizontally.
4. The more people you meet the more situations you will find where your products and services can help the company. The more people in your camp, the more likely the purchase decision will be in your favor.
5. Value drives business decisions. Utilize all your meetings and conversations to uncover the value that the buyer will derive by implementing your products and services.