

Selling to Executives Made Easy

A participant in one of my training workshops once commented how challenging it was for him to sell to senior executives. I could relate to his concern because I, too, used find it intimidating.

What I have learned in the last few years is that Vice Presidents, Directors, Presidents, and CEO's are not as difficult to sell to as you imagine. Here are a few tips to keep in mind the next time you meet with a corporate executive.

1. Be prepared. This is the most important strategy if you want to successfully sell to an executive. Research the company before your meeting. Visit their website. Ask for an annual report. Talk to people within the organization if possible. Gain as much information as you can before your meeting. You may not need the information but at least you will be prepared.
2. Ask provocative questions. I recall a meeting with the President of a home furnishing company a few years. My goal was to learn more about their existing training programs to see if I could them improve their results. I realized later that I could have asked almost anyone in the company the questions I posed to the President. Jill Konrath, President of Leap Frog Strategies, states that great sales people ask tough questions – questions that make prospects think.

This concept also applies when asking for the sale. You don't need to feel insecure or intimidated about asking for the executive's business. Remember, most executives are direct and respect others who can ask direct questions.

3. Focus on ROI. Most executives have one agenda – making their company more successful. They want solutions that will increase their sales or reduce their expenses. That means you need to be prepared to demonstrate the return on investment (ROI) of your product. Learn to express the tangible benefits of your product or service.

For example, my wife teaches people how to improve their productivity with PowerPoint. She has learned that most people will reduce their preparation time by approximately 35-40% after attending her program. If a presentation takes five to eight hours to complete this means that people will be able create a presentation in just three to five hours after the training. This means she saves the company about two to three hours per presentation, per person. If ten people in the company are required to create just one PowerPoint presentation every quarter, this would save the organization almost \$2000 assuming the employees earn an average annual income of \$30,000. The benefits of this "soft" training have now been converted into "hard" dollars.

4. Avoid details. The majority of executives are not interested in the details of a solution. They pay others in the organization to do that for them. Executives are big picture thinkers so be prepared to discuss your product/service on a macro level. Avoid asking them questions about the details of the business – they probably will not have the answers. Case in point - I met with the President of a 300-store chain and even though I did not inquire, he told me he did not know what topics were covered in the training program. And why should he? He pays someone to take care of those details.

A workshop participant once told me that he used to get caught off-guard by his own boss when questioned about his sales results. His boss was not interested in the details of the sales process; he just wanted to know what results the account manager was achieving.

5. Respect their time. The most precious commodity to an executive is time. The average senior-level business person has at least 52 hours of uncompleted work on their desk at any given time. Plus, they usually have only one or two of unscheduled time in a typical week. During a recent conversation with the Vice President of a women's fashion chain, she lamented the fact that she was working 80 hours a week and was still not getting caught up on her work. This was a great reminder that we need to keep our meetings and telephone conversations as brief as possible. Most executives get to the point very quickly and expect others to do the same. Whenever possible, ask how much time the other person has scheduled for your meeting or telephone conversation and do everything you can to finish early. Be direct, concise, and to the point.

I recall giving a presentation at a trade show. Several people approached me, and in hushed tones, pointed out one that of the attendees was the President of a very large corporation. Treat them with respect but don't be intimidated. Remember that executives are people too. Just like you and I. The only real difference is that they are responsible with running a company and managing its results.

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