

ARTICLE REPRINT

Getting a Nose In The Tent

In a difficult economic environment, where almost everyone focuses some of their attention on rising gasoline and food prices, falling stock markets, depressed real estate values and corporate layoffs, it is harder than ever for many sales professionals to make their numbers. As a senior executive, it may be time to adjust expectations and focus on helping your sales team get their noses in your customers' tents.

The primary responsibility of your sales professionals, of course, is to make sales. But when buying decisions are delayed or postponed across customer segments due to a slow economy, you have an opportunity to position your sales team, and your company, for increased sales when the economic climate improves.

While your sales group pursues bona fide sales opportunities with customers who are ready to buy, you can help them focus some of their attention on your most profitable, loyal customers, even when these customers delay or postpone buying decisions. Doing this successfully during tough times requires a plan and a shift in your thinking about team and individual objectives and about the contributions your team can realistically make to your customers' businesses during an economic downturn.

Unfortunately, mid-level managers usually are among the first to bear the brunt of large-scale corporate layoffs. This is a two-sided coin. First, many of these managers may well have been the most important contacts your sales professionals cultivated in buying organizations. Losing those important contacts leaves them naturally vulnerable.

The other side of the coin, however, represents real opportunity for the senior executive who is able and willing to adjust his game plan during tough times. As the workloads and responsibilities of middle managers are transferred to more senior managers, the senior folks may be more accessible than ever to sales professionals. Serendipity places you in a position to help your sales team begin selling higher in customer organizations.

Selling to higher-level managers usually requires skills that differ from those skills your salespeople employed when interacting with lower-level buying contacts. Like you, the more senior managers aren't usually accustomed to buying products or services. They normally approve purchases viewed as solutions that will impact business issues that concern them. That's why your team needs a strategy, a plan for getting the attention of these managers.

The first order of business is to decide on which customers to focus your team's attention. Promoting cross-functional departmental cooperation between marketing, finance,

technical departments and sales will help the sales team determine which of your customers are the most profitable and which hold the greatest potential for future business. Now is a great time for your team to stop pursuing business with prospects or customers that aren't profitable and that aren't a good fit for your company.

Once the cross-functional team creates a list of priority accounts, they should closely examine each customer and learn as much as they can about the customer's business. The team should ask how the customer is being affected by the economic downturn. What are the customer's prospects for surviving a tough economy and prospering in the future? How can your company's products or services help their situation? The sales team ultimately will benefit from the broader perspective of a cross-functional team.

If your solutions can positively impact your customer's business by helping drive more revenue, reduce costs, increase efficiencies, influence their business strategy or enhance their brand, it shouldn't be too difficult to get the attention of executives. If, on the other hand, your offerings are not viewed by the executives as must-haves, your sales team will need another tactic to gain visibility for your solutions.

Finding a way to share stories with executives of customers your salespeople know who are surviving, maybe even prospering in these tough times, is a proven tactic for selling higher in customer organizations. What are some of the things your people see these thriving customers doing that distinguish them from their competitors? Have your sales professionals or your technical staff helped these customers in the past, or are they helping them prosper now? Most executives will set aside a few moments to hear a bona-fide success story if they feel it might help their business.

Once your sales professionals get the attention of executives, and deliver information and insights the executives value, the access road to the executive suite is much easier to navigate. But be sure to advise your team not to abuse this access. Executive managers should only be contacted when your salespeople have something to offer that they are confident the executives will value. Remind your team that executives rarely appreciate hearing a standard sales pitch.

The reality of a down economy may mean fewer sales. While this is disappointing, you have an opportunity to make a plan that positions your sales team, and your company, for increased business with key executives in your customer organizations when the economic climate improves and when those executives loosen the purse strings.

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About the author: Steve Chriest is the founder of Selling Up™ (www.selling-up.com), a sales consulting firm specializing in revenue and sales improvement for organizations of all types and sizes in a variety of industries. He is also the author of *Selling The E-Suite*, *The Proven System For Reaching and Selling Senior Executives* and *Profits and Cash – The Game of Business*. You can reach Steve at schriest@selling-up.com.