

The New York Enterprise Report™

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7 Steps to Successfully Sell to Executives

There are things you need to know when you sell to the CEO.

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It is my experience that executive level sales initiation is different than general sales. Surprisingly, it is often simpler and easier to get a serious hearing at the decision-maker level in a corporation than it is to connect with managers of penultimate or tertiary influence in the decision-making process. Successful high-level selling is different attitudinally. It is different strategically. It is different tonally.

Perhaps before going further I should describe, somewhat apologetically, how I have come to my point of view toward high-level sales and sales in general. Personally, I have no formal background in sales at all. Zero. Whatever I have to impart is strictly practically and experientially learned from my own selling experience to CEOs, CFOs, COOs, and other executives in the "C suite." Nevertheless, my company, Corporate Rain, Inc. was recently listed as the number one executive sales outsourcing company in the U.S.

Corporate Rain is not a genius company. We have no "silver bullet" or proprietary process to solve the executive sales conundrum. What we do uniquely as an outsourcer is project an authoritative, courteous, and even moral presence in representing our clients who range from Fortune 500 companies to small start-ups. What we do on an outsourcing basis can be simply duplicated internally by any company, large or small. However, it does require genuine concern for other people and a projection of confident collegiality.

A New Approach to the Corner Office

In order to make the playing field level for your company, you need to approach the "corner office" differently than you might approach middle management or other levels of a company. Here are some simple ideas that prepare the ground and create the atmosphere for a successful high-level sell.

1. Always approach a corporate decision-maker as a peer. Top-level executives like to deal with equals. It is crucial to project a peer-to-peer presence from the first letter or call. Executives are paid for their instincts. They will know immediately if you are an authoritative colleague or not. Be direct, simple, and courteous. The tone you want to establish is of colleagues solving a problem together.

2. Don't sell initially. I usually start by simply asking executives if they got my introductory letter. Any answer to that question should lead to dialogue and the beginnings of relationship building. That is all you want initially. You want to set a tone of two equals having a discussion. You want to intrigue them enough to set an appointment. Don't sell product. Don't sell service. Sell a meeting. Your initial job is to engage, to intrigue, and to spark interest. Be patient and think in terms of process and relationship, not immediate results.

To the Point

When dealing with C-suite executives you are on a selling fast track; you need to put your best foot forward. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when you walk into the corner offices:

- You can save them money so make sure they know that. If not, you're wasting their time.
- Don't lie. You're not under oath, but these executives can tell when you're not telling the whole truth. If you do lie, it WILL catch up with you eventually.
- It's better to give than receive. Whether it's advice, a free analysis, or a contact, give the executive useful information and don't expect anything in return. The goodwill will come back to haunt you.

3. **Focus on money.** Quantify wherever possible. No matter how esoteric, abstract, strategic, “consultative” or theoretical your offering, you must constantly emphasize the application of your offering to ROI. C-suite executives are practical people. They want and need to know new products and strategies that improve profitability.

4. **Don’t waste time.** Get to the point. However, do this without rushing. Practice reducing your verbiage. C-suite executives are always very busy and their time has value. If there is any response to your “pitch,” of course, encourage them by listening and drawing them out in their terms. It is more important to establish a beginning relationship than get in a totally perfect accounting of your value proposition.

5. **Tell the truth.** Good executive salesmanship starts with complete candor. Like Mom told you, always tell the truth. Executives will instinctively know if you’re real and they will know it immediately.

6. **Persist.** Decision makers will respect you for staying after them with a true bespoke courtesy. Genuine politeness and real concern for your potential customer are not incompatible with passionate and even fierce evangelizing of your value proposition.

7. **Never lose the opportunity to give something away for free.** Whether it be advice, an unbilled initial analysis, or a contact that might be useful to your potential client. Don’t expect any quid pro quo. Give freely and generously without expectation of return. Not only is this good karma and spiritually rewarding—it nearly always pays off in long-term references and goodwill, as well as is revealing to a potential customer the quality of your commitment to his concerns and of your service efficacy in any potential business he might do with you.

High level corporate selling used to be conducted with variations on “good old boy” socializing like golf course rainmaking, wining and dining, and social connections. Of course, it still is to a considerable extent. However, the times they are a changin’. Corporate cultures have speeded up and information technology and a universal push for productivity place a premium on everyone’s time.

Real decision makers are open to and even eager for new ideas and creative answers to their problems. They have the courage and authority to take risks and open new initiatives. (Indeed, it is middle management at larger companies that is harder to break into because often middle managers are primarily interested in first protecting their asses rather than innovative solutions to their company’s problems.) Decision-makers want to be excited by new ideas, solutions, and products. It’s their job not to miss the next great thing. Your first job is to build the atmosphere that opens the possibility of creating that initial hearing.

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