

Achieving Credibility with Client Executives

By [Steve Bistriz](#) on Jul-12-2007 | [How to Handle Competition](#)

Achieving credibility with client executives is a major factor in developing lasting business relationships, according to two studies done by OnTarget and the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina and the Center for Business and Industrial Marketing at Georgia State University.

These two studies focused on the relationships that professional salespeople developed with senior executives, from the perspective of C-level executives. The conclusion of the two studies: That becoming a trusted advisor to these executives should be a major objective for most salespeople involved in high value, complex sales campaigns.

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So how does a salesperson become perceived as a trusted advisor to these executives? According to the research, executives indicated that salespeople can begin to establish credibility with them by thoroughly understanding their business and by being able to marshal the resources they need to solve a problem.

Executives don't want to deal with multiple people from different companies to help resolve an issue or problem. They want to know that one person has the responsibility, the motivation and most importantly, the willingness to be held accountable to help them resolve their business problems.

Credibility can be obtained by combining the components of capability, as it relates to the business side of the relationship and integrity, which relates mainly to the personal side of the relationship. A salesperson who operates on only one of those two planes will never achieve a trusted advisor relationship with an executive.

If salespeople only work to establish their capability for getting the job done, they often position themselves as a "technical expert or an extra pair of hands," which does not offer much in the way of competitive advantage.

On the other hand, a salesperson who focuses solely on building the personal side of the relationship may end up as a friend of the client executive, while others who focus on both the personal and business aspects of the relationship will become viewed as trusted advisors. Executives examine both the integrity and capability components of the relationship as they evaluate a salesperson's credibility.

Top performing salespeople understand that building credibility at the executive level comes from providing the executive with a sense that they understand the client's business, they have the capability and experience to help them solve business problems and their intention is in building lasting, long-term relationships.

By doing this, a salesperson is able to enhance the relationship, become the executive's trusted advisor and continually operate in the Client's Value Zone, according to Jagdish Sheth, author of *Clients for Life*.

So why then don't professional salespeople call on senior client executives?

Interviews with top salespeople confirm their fear of calling on senior-level client executives. Fear of failure is often cited as their primary concern. They are absolutely right when they view this type of executive call as a high-stakes game and blowing a call at the executive level can deny them return access for an extended period of time.

Their second fear is lack of self-confidence. This is hard for many salespeople to admit. Their ability to review the technical details of their solution at lower levels in the client organization is typically beyond reproach; however, they are, at times, intimidated calling at higher levels. The fact is that many salespeople are out of their comfort zone when they get to the top levels of the client organization.

The third fear is their lack of equivalent position. At times they feel they have to be of "like rank" in order to call on senior-level executives. To compensate, they bring one of their company's executives without briefing them beforehand. The result is a "glad-hand" call that simply wasted the time of the client executive.

The three fears cited above can be mitigated by effective preparation for that critical first call on a client executive. A salesperson should focus on three areas of acquiring knowledge about the client; namely, the client's industry, the client's company and the client executive. Knowing how to access and acquire this

information on the internet is today's new skill that is a requirement of being a professional salesperson.

When the Chief Information Officer of a large technology corporation was asked: "Why would someone at your level meet with salespeople?" his reply was, "because salespeople can often offer solutions to my business problems that even people in my own organization can't address. I want to meet with them because of their experience in solving problems in other organizations and the subsequent value they can offer to me."

Only when salespeople demonstrate that they are willing to understand and listen to the executive's key business issues, articulate the business value they can deliver to them and demonstrate a consistent ability to be perceived as a trusted advisor can they begin to overcome their own fears of calling on executives at that level.

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