

Building Credibility with Senior-Level Customer Executives

By [Steve Bistriz](#) on Jan-29-2004 | [Networking and Relationships](#)

Building credibility with senior-level customer executives is a critical 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.

So how is credibility developed over the long term? Credibility combines the building of trust at a personal level and proving capability in getting the job done at the business level.

People buy from people they like, is an old sales adage. However, that's not exactly true when it comes to the way senior executives make buying decisions on major purchases of products and services. The surveys cited above clearly indicate that personal feelings were usually not the deciding factor in the decision-making processes embraced by most senior executives. Instead, buying decisions were based on trust. What an executive feels personally about a salesperson is clearly beside the point. They want to feel that they can trust a salesperson to create value for them, and for their organization as well. That isn't to suggest that salespeople shouldn't continue to build relationships with customer executives, but that they shouldn't confuse being a friend with being a trusted advisor.

Too often, salespeople focus on either establishing capability or building a relationship based on trust. 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.

"Let's pretend I have a problem that needs to be solved," says one customer executive. "I know two people who have demonstrated expertise in that area: One I trust and respect. The other might actually have more expertise, but I don't know him or her as well. If I call the one I trust, I'll begin to act immediately on his advice. If I call the other person, I'll probably double check and get a second opinion."

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 customer 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 trust and capability components of the relationship as they evaluate a salesperson's credibility.

According to the executives surveyed, another essential factor in building trust was the salesperson's candor. Executives can sense when someone is not giving them all the facts. Trust erodes very quickly when the executive feels that they are only receiving part of the story. Executives stated that salespeople who misled them make them "wonder what other problems weren't being disclosed" and abhorred "last minute surprises" from solution providers. One executive stated that, "There are always issues surrounding any potential solutions to business problems. I want to get as clear an indication as possible on what those issues are at the beginning of the project."

Top performing salespeople understand that building credibility at the executive level comes from providing the executive with a sense that they understand the customer'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 operating in this fashion, a salesperson is able to enhance the relationship and become the executive's trusted advisor.

Barriers to Success

Interviews with top salespeople confirm their fear of calling on senior-level customer 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 customer 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 customer 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 customer executive.

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