



How to Convince Company Leaders to Utilize your Solution

SUMMARY

Although closing a complex enterprise account may take many months to complete, every deal has a critical moment when it is won or lost. While you will frequently meet with lower-level and mid-level employees at companies whose business you're trying to secure, the rare face-to-face conversations you have with C-level decision makers will directly determine whether you win or lose the deal. In this white paper we examine how to conduct successful C-level sales calls and the psychological strategies and linguistic tactics that help you convince company leaders to buy.

Sales is a process—the process of building a relationship, turning a skeptic into a believer, and making a stranger your friend. Language and the words you say are the tools you use to achieve these results. A question we are often asked is, “What should I say to persuade the CEO, CFO, or CIO to buy?”

Unfortunately, we don’t know of any magic words. This is because no two CEOs, CFOs, or CIOs are exactly alike. Each is a unique individual who works in a one-of-a-kind company environment with its own set of business challenges and opportunities.

The real answer to this all-important question is that you need a methodology to conduct the sales call with the executive with whom you will be meeting. You need to create and execute an action plan. Without a plan, you’re reciting your standard company pitch and just doing a canned presentation. You will not win over the C-level executive as a result. With this in mind, here are the five steps for conducting the successful C-Level sales call:

- STEP 1—DETERMINE YOUR GOAL
- STEP 2—RESEARCH THE EXECUTIVE
- STEP 3—ASK QUESTIONS TO DISCOVER REALITY
- STEP 4—MATCH YOUR SELLING STYLE TO THE EXECUTIVE
- STEP 5—GET TO THE CONFIDENTIAL C-LEVEL LANGUAGE

Let’s discuss each of these steps in detail.

STEP 1—DETERMINE YOUR GOAL

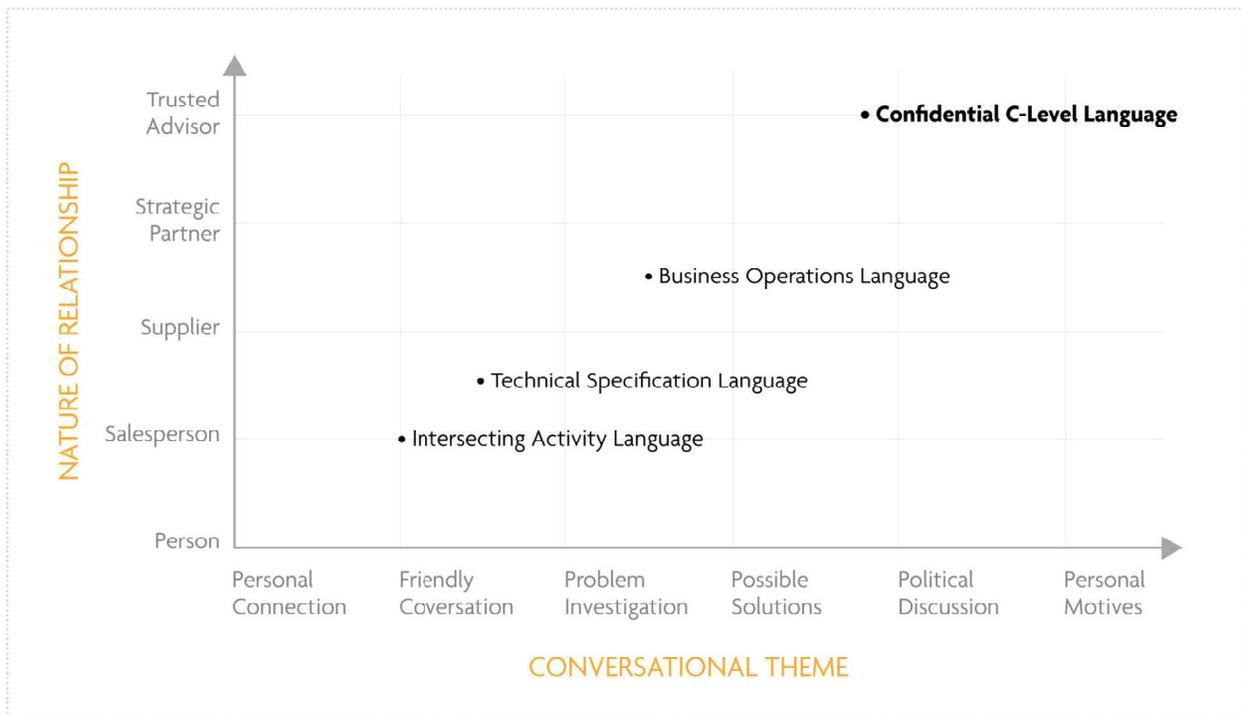
The first step is to determine your goal for the executive meeting. The ultimate goal for the C-level meeting is simple: you want the executive to honestly explain what he is trying to accomplish and why he is doing it from a business and, more importantly, personal standpoint. Ultimately, you want him to tell you about his personal needs, share his private problems, and explain his career desires along with how he plans to fulfill them.

You are not there to sell anything! Your goal is to become a trusted advisor by asking questions and intently listening to the answers so that you can apply your expertise to solve the executive’s business problems or complete his initiatives. The conversational theme starts with establishing a personal connection, followed by problem investigation, and a discussion of possible solutions. Ideally, the conversation flows into an off-the-record talk about the politics of his organization and his ulterior motives.

Accomplishing this requires you to speak the progression of languages represented below:



The sales call starts with the Intersecting activity language. All executives have outside interests, hobbies, and personal pursuits by which they display their personalities, beliefs, and values. Each of these activities has their own unique language. For example, a conversation about stock investing requires an understanding of terms such as “price earnings ratio,” “market cap,” and “stock shorting.” Through the use and understanding of these common terms, you can establish a rapport and build a personal friendship that sets you apart from the competition.



The next language spoken is the technical specification language. This is the androgynous, non-personal, and technical communication that is based upon the nomenclature and technical terms of the executive’s industry, like, for example, the legal community terms Client, Motion, and Deposition. This is one of the fundamental languages you must speak with the executive in order to establish credibility.

The business operations language is the language that is specific to the daily running of the executive’s business and his role in the organization. For instance, the COO, CIO, and vice president of Accounting each speak a different language that is associated with running their department.

The confidential C-level language is the most powerful trust-based language by which the executive explains his personal needs, desires, and plans and how he hopes to fulfill them. While the business operations language is a personal language based upon what they want to do in the future. Unfortunately, the majority of executive conversations never reach the confidential C-level language. The discussion gets stuck at the technical specification language or the business operations language. The executive will only speak this language with you when you are considered a trusted advisor.



STEP 2—RESEARCH THE EXECUTIVE

Before you meet with any executive, you need to research his business. Old-fashioned detective work is still vitally important today. Talk with your existing contacts in the account and find out all the information you can prior to your call. Fortunately, the Internet makes information more readily available than ever. Study every page of information on the customer's Web site as though your life depended on it. Read the annual report, press releases, and product information, and scan all the various financial documents. From these documents you can derive your initial thoughts about your solution's strategic value and how you can solve the executive's problems.

Equally important, you need to conduct exhaustive research about the executive's personal background. Unfortunately, you won't find profile information about most senior executives on their company web site. Fortune 1000 companies will only profile a handful of their most senior leaders, if any at all. You can try to "Google" the person's name but you will end up wasting valuable time sifting through hundreds of unrelated results.

STEP 3—ASK QUESTIONS TO DISCOVER REALITY

The most important part of the executive sales call is the beginning of the meeting when you have the opportunity to ask questions. This is your "discovery" part of the sales call and the executive's answers help you find intersecting activities you have in common. More importantly, the questions you ask also provide the opportunity to demonstrate your command of the technical specification language used in their industry and show the executive that you understand how his company runs by speaking the business operations language. Successful discovery is the first step toward building a foundation of trust and respect that leads to the executive speaking the confidential C-level language.

Everyone operates in his or her own individual reality. While you may have had twenty meetings with low-level and mid-level personnel, the goal of asking the C-level executive questions is triangulation. Triangulation is the process of checking multiple data points of information about an account with various decision makers to ensure it is accurate and true. In order to identify true reality, these data points should always include information from C-level executives.

The six types of questions to ask executives are based upon "what," "how," "why," "when," "who," and "would." "What" questions include "What are you trying to accomplish?" and "What business problem are you trying to solve?" "How" questions include "How will you make a decision?" and "How will you implement the solution?"

"Why" questions include "Why is the company evaluating new solutions?" and "Why is this particular person on the evaluation team?" "When" questions include "When will a decision be made?" and "When is the project to be completed?" "Who" questions include "Who will perform the evaluation?" and "Who will sign the contract?" "Would" questions include "Would you like to meet with our CEO?" and "Would it make sense for me to start meeting with your contract team?" Most salespeople are well versed at asking who, when, and how questions but don't spend enough time asking what, why, and would questions.

Even though we may have asked the same questions many times of low-level and mid-level personnel, we need to ascertain reality according to the C-level executive in charge. The C-level executive's perception of the pain, problem, and future plans may be vastly different than the reality that has been presented to you by his staff.

STEP 4—MATCH YOUR SELLING STYLE TO THE C-LEVEL EXECUTIVE

How do you communicate with a C-level executive you have never met before? How do you best present your story, and what demeanor should you use to convince him to speak in confidence with you?



Your selling style is influenced by a complex combination of your instinctive drives. You naturally use these instincts to exert your will upon customers. Seven basic instincts determine your selling style and your actions at any particular moment: dominance, hyperactivity, pride, greed, transparency, curiosity, and empathy. Let's discuss each of these instincts and apply them to the C-Level sales call.

Dominance. Dominance—the drive to take command of a situation—is instrumental to a salesperson's success. Some salespeople have such a strong dominance instinct that they think of customers as naturally inferior people. Conversely, a salesperson with a weak dominance instinct is more apt to operate under the direction of customers.

Usually, you should seek the equilibrium point between dominance and submission. It's the point where the executive respects your conviction and is not offended by your persistence.

Hyperactivity. You can think of the instinct of hyperactivity as your sales metabolism, the pace at which you conduct yourself during the call. Some salespeople can't stop moving. They're always talking and nervous or uncomfortable when the conversation stops. Other salespeople are more deliberate in their moves, and they take longer to complete their sentences. Whether one pace is better than the other depends upon the person with whom you are meeting. The secret is to mirror the executive's speaking style and talk at the same pace and tempo as the executive.

Pride. You may not have initially thought of pride as an instinct, but it is one. Pride is the measure of self-importance and your opinion of your own worth. Pride is also the midway point between arrogance and humility. Most executives expect you to act with humility. However, some want to intimidate you and don't expect prideful resistance.

In general, arrogance is a very bad attribute during a sales call. However, some C-level meetings actually require self-importance and pretentiousness.

Greed. We normally associate greed with a miserly scrooge or a corrupt character. While this may be society's definition, "greed" takes on an entirely different meaning during C-level sales calls. You have probably worked with many different types of salespeople, and you may have noticed that some gravitated toward working on only big deals, while others nickel-and-dime their way to their quotas. With some executives you should try to make the deal as big as possible and include all the potential options and services. With others you should keep the deal small and more affordable so that it elicits the least amount of scrutiny.

Transparency. This is the ability to be exactly who you are and the propensity to be perfectly frank about it. In other words, what people see is what you are. Some salespeople are completely transparent. They are very comfortable with themselves, let others see exactly who they are, and tell it like it is. Other salespeople tend to display less personality and shield themselves behind a more formal demeanor. They play the role of the salesperson.

We normally don't associate confrontation with sales calls. After all, we're trying to build relationships. However, transparent salespeople aren't afraid to be frank with C-level executives. As a result, they build credibility. Meanwhile, passive salespeople distance themselves from any confrontation. They are more likely to yield to the opinions of others and by playing it safe, lose the executive's respect.

Curiosity. Like people in general, salespeople have different levels of curiosity. Some salespeople have a healthy curiosity and a strong need to know every detail, probably because they have to satisfy their insatiable desire to know the truth: "Will I win the deal?" Others are more likely to take a customer's words at face value. Always exercise high curiosity with the executive until you sense your questions are breaking your rapport.



Empathy. When we watch someone else perform an action, mirror neurons in our minds fire off and respond as if we were doing it ourselves. Mirror neurons help explain why laughter is contagious, why we grimace in pain for people we don't even know, and why we feel like crying when we see others cry. However, not everyone has the same amount or strength of mirror neurons. Therefore, we must put ourselves in the "mental shoes" of the executive we are meeting with to truly understand his plight. However, remember that there are some executives who will interpret your empathy as a sign of weakness and inferiority.

Now that we have defined each of the seven instincts, do the following exercise and apply the instincts before your next C-level executive meeting. On a scale of 1 to 5, low to high, circle the number that best represents the strength of each of the instincts you should use when you meet with that executive:

Dominance 1 2 3 4 5
Hyperactivity 1 2 3 4 5
Pride 1 2 3 4 5
Greed 1 2 3 4 5
Transparency 1 2 3 4 5
Curiosity 1 2 3 4 5
Empathy 1 2 3 4 5

Although you can achieve success with any combination of the seven instincts, the most successful Heavy Hitter salespeople are chameleons who know they must dominate one executive and be submissive to another. Sometimes they follow orders and other times they question authority. While they are comfortable being exactly who they are, they can take on any role required to win business.

STEP 5—GET TO THE CONFIDENTIAL C-LEVEL LANGUAGE

The biggest problem with most executive sales calls is that the confidential C-level language isn't spoken. The confidential C-level language is a personal language the executive uses to explain what he wants to do and why. The language is based on accomplishing future objectives to increase or retain power.

Most often, the sales call conversation stays at the business operations level and never approaches confidentially, where the executive's true motivations would be revealed.

How do you establish the level of trust necessary to get to the confidential C-level language? The answer is three-fold. First, you must know your own products inside out, be able to talk about your industry with expertise, and intimately understand the operations of the executive's business. To earn the executive's respect you must demonstrate your competence as evidenced by this quote.

"Your people will tell you what you want to hear. It's a little bit like being the emperor who wore no clothes. What I need out of a partner is not just someone who will do what I tell them to do. I need someone who knows as much or more about the marketplace, who can shape my thinking and requests so that they can provide the most value." -Philip R. Foss, CEO & Managing Partner.

Second, you must adapt your demeanor, selling style, and your use of language to match that of the executive. The way you dress and present yourself provides important cues to the executive. Your customer has standards and certain expectations about the way you will act, look, and speak. These qualities will greatly influence the executive's decision and whether or not he will share his personal thoughts.



The final answer might surprise you. A critical aspect of the C-level sales call is not necessarily what you have planned to say on your call or in your presentation. Rather, it is how you handle the tough questions the executive asks you. Your question-handling ability during and after your presentation is one of the main attributes that distinguish you from the pack.

Answering questions from C-level executives enables you to tell your point of view about the industry, display your business operations expertise, and demonstrate your sales acumen. However, many times salespeople are too eager to give an answer to a question that wasn't even asked. That's why the first step in answering a question is to always clarify the question and make sure you understand what the executive is asking.

The C-level executive expects you to respond to his question within a certain time frame. When you are face to face, this time is measured in seconds and there is a penalty for delay. If the expected length of time is exceeded, the C-level executive will perceive that you don't command the facts or worse yet, that your answer is untruthful. When this occurs, it is difficult to establish that you are his equal because you have lost the executive's trust. As a result, the executive will not speak the confidential C-level language with you.

The main point is that you need to anticipate the questions the executive will ask and have answers prepared and internalized in advance. In other words, you need to create a list of all the toughest questions he could ask and then verbally rehearse your answers so your delivery is smooth and credible. The answers should not be more than thirty seconds long and should succinctly answer, not evade or redirect, the question.

CONCLUSION

I know you might be worried that the big executive sales call may be your only chance to meet with the executive; therefore you feel you must explain to him how wonderful your company and products are. Well, if you go into the c-level meeting with the intention of selling something, you'll be proven right: it will be the last time you get on his busy calendar.

Never forget, although you are excited about the meeting, the C-level executive isn't that excited about your products and not all that interested in your marketing pitch. He's heard them and seen them before, and they all sound the same. You will be granted continual access if you can demonstrate how you can help solve his business problems and help him achieve his personal ambitions.

About the Author:

As CEO & Managing Partner of OPTIS Group, Philip R. Foss is responsible in partnership for running all facets of the business. Phil has a proven executive management track record with over 22 years of mortgage banking origination & management experience. Mr. Foss focuses on enterprise-level business model construction and deployment throughout the country's mid-size mortgage companies, leading the marketing & customer strategy practice within all 4 silos and directing sales within customer service go-to-market issues helping our client partners realize higher return-on-market and CRM investments.