

SELLING AT “C-LEVEL”



Calling on Chief Executives and
Political Navigation

by Rick Page, Founder & CEO, The Complex Sale, Inc.

The principals in our firm, The Complex Sale, are all successful senior sales executives who collectively have made well over ten thousand executive sales calls during their careers and whose real world experience with our clients has yielded a number of best practices for selling at “C-level”.

Outside-In and Bottom-Up - The Hard Road

The best way to avoid going over someone’s head is to start there. Choosing your point of entry is an opportunity to gain better control early. Many veteran salespeople, tired of being blocked at lower levels, jockey hard and fast to gain initial access at higher levels. It doesn’t always work, but the benefits are enormous in greater control and shorter sales cycles.

Unfortunately, on the first piece of business with a company, this isn’t always possible. We are often contacted by a project leader or someone who has been charged with sending requests for proposal to vendors. Their first words to a salesperson are, “Direct all your inquiries to me” often followed by, “I’m the decision maker.”

To a salesperson, project leaders can be gatekeepers. And they are often covered in political glue. Once you touch them, you’re stuck. One approach is not to touch them at all. They may be nice people and they may be instrumental to your sale, but they can limit your political navigation. Someone once told me, “Try not to take ‘no’ from someone who can’t say ‘yes.’”



Taking You Higher

Sometimes you have no choice but to start at the bottom or middle and work your way up. If you are to navigate to top executives, you have two choices. The first, which is going directly over someone's head, is sure to alienate the subordinate and has little chance of success.

Instead, you have to find a reason in the contact's interests to take you to their boss. Once a gatekeeper is on your side, he or she can be instrumental in helping you navigate higher - if you give them a reason that's on his or her agenda.

Why would someone take you to their boss?

RECOGNITION & GLORY - If they believe you have a solution that will be successful in their organization, they will get credit for bringing you in. But they have to believe in you and your solution.

SECURED RESOURCES - They may need help to gain staff or budget to proceed.

MITIGATED RISK - In case this project craters, they want to get their boss in the boat with them.

PROJECT SCOPE (LATERAL) - When projects become interdepartmental or international, managers usually need to be brought in to coordinate with other business units.

PROJECT SCOPE (STRATEGIC) - When issues go beyond operational and begin to affect organizational politics or strategy, project teams realize the need for management involvement.

MY BOSS, YOUR BOSS - Equivalent rank meetings are important to provide insurance in high-risk projects. They can insure resources, continuity, quality oversight, and problem escalation. These meetings also have a status value, especially in Europe and Asia where class distinctions are still greater. If their boss won't meet with you, it's a sign they aren't thinking of doing business with you.

BARGAIN FOR ACCESS - Trade for access while the client has something they need from you. While they need you in the game for due diligence, you can take requests for proposals, information, and demonstrations to bargain for access to executives. Later on, when they have your materials and you're not leading, you won't have anything with which to bargain.

YOU ASKED - Perhaps the only reason someone hasn't taken you to the boss is because you've never asked!

In order to make things happen in the complex sale, we have to get out of our comfort zone and into the power zone.

Sponsorship - The Passport to Account Management

The best way to get access to an executive is through another executive or a trusted colleague. Executives are barraged every day with dozens of voice mails, e-mails, and phone messages. Many of these are nonbusiness calls or not important. However, the ones that get the most attention and credibility are the ones that they are expecting based on the recommendation of a colleague. I call it “transferred trust,” or the friend of my friend is my friend.

Bottom-up selling is difficult enough, but the irony is that once salespeople get to executives they fail to leverage that relationship to its fullest potential. Many times salespeople get to an executive, close the sale, and then they aren’t seen again until there’s a problem. Quarterly incentives and short-term thinking often create a hit-and-run selling mentality. In California it’s called “drive-by selling.” And it represents a chasm between competitive selling and repetitive selling.

The gateway (as well as the barrier) to repeat business and reference business is performance on the last sale. If we deliver on what we have sold and create a satisfied executive, this creates a neutron of customer satisfaction that can lead to another marketing molecule. Proactive sponsorship can then allow us to rise to an entirely different level of selling.

Executive sponsorship allows us to move from bottom-up selling to top-down selling and to shorten sales cycles. When you enter an organization from the top you can learn the right issues, spend time with the right people, and avoid vendor abuse from project teams.

Other Points of Entry

Additional sources of executive sponsorship include professional associations, industry network contacts, previous customers, other divisions, and third-party channel partners.

Every satisfied client is a neutron that can bang into another marketing molecule releasing enormous energy and enthusiasm for you and your company. Of course, if your clients are unhappy with the results of what they bought, then the nuclear metaphor becomes one of toxic pollution and fallout as one bad reference cancels out half a dozen good ones. But then, only a handful of companies reward salespeople for customer satisfaction.

The Executive Sales Call

STRATEGIC LITERACY - GET ON THE EXECUTIVE BANDWIDTH

Technical benefits are important to people who actually have to use your solution. But executives speak a different language. They buy strategic, political, cultural, and financial benefits. This means that you may have to give as many as two or three benefits for one capability if there are both groups in your meeting. “Because we can do this, it means this to you in the factory, it means this to you in the finance department, and it means this to you as the CEO.”

Executives’ issues often include:

STRATEGIC - Competitive advantage, customer satisfaction, mergers and acquisitions, stockholders, boards of directors, growth, government regulation, litigation, market share, company image

POLITICAL - Stockholders, boards of directors, promotion, recognition, elections, unions, succession planning, taxpayers, stakeholders, environment, trade barriers, risk

FINANCIAL - Return on investment, cash flow, stock price, budgets, survival, economy, earnings per share, productivity, exchange rates, significant cost savings, third-party payments

CULTURAL - Competitiveness, deregulation, innovation, quality, risk-taking, teamwork, communication, cooperation, vision, consensus

Executives have no shortage of pains. Link your product, technology, or solution into one of these issues, and you’ll be broadcast-ing on their wavelength. Executives want partners who can help them run their companies better rather than carriers of prod-ucts. This means new challenges to salespeople to become industry experts not just product experts. The business developer of today must see the client through the executives’ eyes and learn their “stay-awake” issues. They must move the buyer-seller relationship up from coexistence to collaborative to co-management if they are to gain the inside track on the competition.

Building strategic literacy means reading and learning our client’s business as well or better than they know it themselves. Re-search should be done both inside with internal supporters and outside through third parties and the Internet. Then we must sell strategic benefits to strategic buyers.

Connecting your capabilities or features to the higher level benefits will give you greater power in the sale. Here is an example of turning a small functionality advantage into a major sale by linking into the strategic issues. What is strategic to a chief information officer is quite often tactical to a chief executive officer, the doctor, or the end user. Hardware, operating systems, and technology itself are strategic to CIOs, but they are tactical to chief executives and users. What is strategic to the hospital administrator focused on costs is tactical to the physician focused on patient outcomes.

The Executive Sales Call - What Won't Work

“Tell me about your company.” Ask this question to a C-level executive and what they will probably tell you is where the exits are located. The talk-listen ratio, which we learned in consultative selling, shifts somewhat back to the salesperson in the executive sales call. The consultative research is still important - but it has to be done *before* you get to the executive.

You should still have an interactive exchange with the executive, but if you've never met, you must establish knowledgeability of the company and the industry either directly or by referral. You can then go to reflexive listening and validating the executive's pain.

The Outside Expert's Opinion - Benchmarks and Best Practices

They don't have time to tell you about their company; they want you to tell them something they *don't know* about their *own* company - with an outside expert's opinion.

“How do we compare to other companies in our industry? How do we compare to best practices and operating ratios?” Executives need an outside view of their firms because they get filtered information or stale thinking from their own people about the real status of their own firms.

Selling technical benefits to executive buyers is like dogs watching TV; they may nod, but you know they're not getting any of it.

Help Them Prepare for the Future - Ideas and Innovations

Executives are paid to set the strategy for their companies for the next five to ten years. And if the Peter Principle hasn't raised them to their next level of incompetence as they rose through their organizations, it is being thrust upon them from above. Changes in technology, globalization, competition, and deregulation are creating pains that executives have never faced before. They are looking for answers, and consultative salespeople are the harbingers of new solutions.

Create a Vision of Value

If the purpose of the call is to create demand, you will want to create a value proposition of the solution you propose and a vision of the pains that would happen if nothing were done. In this case, we are seeking a power sponsor to sell inside for us.

Some methodologies imply that a high return on investment (ROI) will naturally motivate buying activity. This assumes a logical approach to project sponsorship. Our experience has shown that unless your proposal has emotional and personal political benefits for the sponsor, nobody will take up the banner. Most chief financial officers have at least a half dozen proposals on their desk at any one time with sufficient returns on investment and not enough funds to do them all.

Motivating pain doesn't come from the rational side of the business problem; it comes if there is political recognition for success or embarrassment for inaction.

Why You? Differentiation



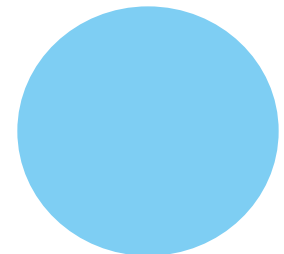
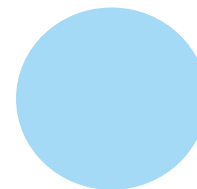
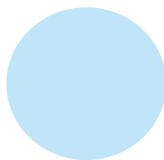
You not only need to show how you can do something better than the client can do for themselves, you must show why you are better than anybody else. Some capabilities or features are *satisfiers* - everybody has them. Some advantages are *absolute differentiators* - only you have them now. Others are *relative differentiators* - you do them faster, better, easier, or at less cost. A unique differentiator linked to an urgent strategic pain is the dream scenario for a consultative salesperson.

Seek Sponsorship

If you are successful at generating interest and need to work with others in the organization, be sure the executive sponsors you (rather than just refers you) to that individual with a phone call, e-mail, or personal introduction so trust is transferred effectively.

Get Your Return Ticket Punched

The challenge of an executive sales call is that you must create a reason to return or you will be on the outside again. If you have raised issues of value to the executive, work to define a reason to return - a follow-up to do, a question to research, a meeting at a future conference or trade show, a book or article, or a proposal. But it has to be meaningful. An unplanned call may mean you lose the access you worked so hard to gain. The worst thing you can do to executives is waste their time.



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This eBook, based on excerpts from Rick Page’s acclaimed best-selling book, *Hope Is Not A Strategy: The 6 Keys to Winning the Complex Sale*, provides you with valuable insights on how to sell smarter than ever before and win the sales you can’t afford to lose. Rick is the founder and CEO of The Complex Sale, Inc. in Atlanta, Georgia.

The Complex Sale, Inc. is a sales methodology and consulting company that helps you win the sales you can’t afford to lose - from speeches and tools to training and coaching to total sales force transformation. We help leading companies create pipeline, win opportunities, and dominate accounts in the complex selling environment. Founded in 1994 by Rick Page, author of the sales bestseller *Hope Is Not A Strategy - The 6 Keys To Winning The Complex Sale* and *Make Winning A Habit - 20 Best Practices Of The World’s Greatest Sale Forces*, The Complex Sale delivers programs taught by executives who know the environment firsthand. We provide the skills and processes you need to make winning a habit in your organization.

For more information on how The Complex Sale, Inc. can help you and your organization, contact us today at info@complexsale.com or call us at 770-360-9299.

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