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Prepare before meeting decision-makers

Denver Business Journal - by [Garry Duncan](#) Special to the Denver Business Journal

As workdays lengthen and workloads increase, getting face time with decision-makers in larger companies requires planning and skill. They reasonably protect themselves from the time abuses of unskilled and uninformed salespeople.

Dale Carnegie told a story of two woodchoppers. The woodchopper working steadily without breaks was amazed that his partner had chopped more wood at the end of the day, despite his partner taking frequent breaks. The more productive woodchopper told his partner he spent each break sharpening his axe.

Larger companies expect you to have a sharp axe and haven't time to "explore a mutual fit." If you don't demonstrate you know their world, you'll fail every time. A frequent mistake is asking for an appointment before identifying a reason that's important to your contact.

- First, sharpen your axe by doing your research. Web sites are the easiest place to start. Industry and business journals are also good, as is the company's own literature.

Seasoned representatives gain credibility early by knowing the language of individual companies and industries. Do they talk about channels or distributors? Do they ask for quotes or use RFPs? Is value engineering a positive or a negative?

It can mean the difference between being perceived as a peddler or a credible resource.

- Second, obtain the name of the person or persons you need. Find an organization chart or decipher one from information you've already gathered, then make inquiry calls to identify the players. In larger organizations, it may take eight to 10 conversations to identify the right person or group of individuals.

An example was a pharmaceutical representative who visited with several local pharmacists and hospital employees to identify the influential committee members. Questions such as "Who was involved in choosing your current provider?" and "What was the decision process last time you made this kind of change?" can provide valuable insight.

- Next, plan your approach. The four basic ways to initiate contact are referral, telephone, e-mail and mail. Walk-ins aren't practical for prospects steeped in security or located halfway around the world.

(1) A referral to someone within the company you're targeting is the most effective route. Share a list of major accounts with clients, friends, vendors, networking contacts and others, and ask

if they know anyone within the targeted account.

Local or branch offices, and local representatives, may be able to help you identify and navigate a successful course. Show respect and gain endorsement by asking permission to use names, and don't imply relationships you don't have.

(2) The second approach is directly by telephone. Learn how to work with gatekeepers, both real and electronic. To do business, you must talk with someone, so navigate the electronic menus and get to a live body you can ask for help.

Treat administrative and executive assistants the same as you would a decision-maker. In most cases, it's not advisable to leave a voice mail if the decision-maker isn't expecting your call.

Invest extra effort to connect with those people important to reach. The best times for attempts are early and late morning, during lunch, and early and late afternoon.

(3) and (4) E-mail and snail mail help many business developers feel more comfortable initially, but eventually you'll need to speak with your prospect directly. E-mails can be hit and miss, so ask the administrative assistant about preferences.

Be brief and clear, and use select points. Avoid using attachments, and don't use subject lines that can appear to be spam. Leaving a voice mail signaling you are sending the e-mail is sometimes effective.

In any approach, your prospect will want to know if you're qualified to make the claims you do.

Concisely and clearly, let them know who you are, what you do and why you're contacting them. Citing similar industries or companies you've worked with builds credibility.

Decision-makers like proof, so include any succinct statement of end results or successes you've helped others achieve.

Neil Rackham, author of "Major Account Sales Strategy," cites three phases large buyers tend to experience.

- First, a judgment is made if a change needs to occur, or if the problem is big enough to merit attention. The salesperson's role here is to fully develop that need before doing anything else.
- Once an organization has determined the need to address a problem, it wants to review its options and choices. In this phase, the seller can create value by assisting in the identification of decision criteria, such as durability, service or other differentiators favorable to the seller.

In high-volume, repetitive-bid situations, the criteria are already clearly established.

- Finally, a seller who's near to closing a major deal may experience a form of buyer's remorse. During the final stage, decision-makers may need extra evidence they're making a safe decision, and that you can provide what they want.

Taking time to do your homework, being precise, patient and identifying the customers' buying

phase are the keys to landing that special account.

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