



Strategies to Maximize Sales Results

ACHIEVE SALES SUCCESS &
TRANSFORM INTO A TOP PERFORMER



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INTRODUCTION

An African proverb says if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

As three seasoned sales executives, we've teamed together to create a resource to help sales professionals maximize results. Our goal is to help you go farther, achieve sales success, and transform into a top performer.

This collaboration is unique because it combines knowledge gained through our three distinct experiences: sales producer turned entrepreneur, corporate sales strategist, and B2B marketing leader and sales training facilitator.

In sales, as in most other professions, 20 percent of the producers deliver 80 percent of the revenue. To become one of those elite, you must elevate your presence and increase your caliber. In "6 Strategies to Maximize Sales Results," we will explore the following topics.

MINDSET FOR SALES SUCCESS: Your way of thinking can help you spark success. This article shares practical ways a sales professional can cultivate a productive and positive mindset.

CREATING INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY: We consider intellectual curiosity to be the "x factor" among successful people. This article will offer ideas for maximizing sales success by honing your intellectual curiosity and active listening skills.

SHOWING UP: Is your head in the game? In sales, it's critical to show up mentally, not just physically. Tips in this article include creating a good impression through authenticity and preparedness.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CUSTOMER: Do we really know our customers? How can we do better? This article explores the evolution of customer understanding, and provides an overview of research strategies.

PROSPECTING AND PIPELINE MANAGEMENT: The quality and quantity of your pipeline are direct results of balanced prospecting and pipeline management. This article provides tips for knowing your numbers, clearing the pipe, and uncovering pipeline patterns.

SELLING TO THE C-SUITE: Learn how to think like an executive so you can be fully prepared to engage in meaningful and productive dialogues about his or her business—not your agenda. The article will include questions to ask yourself when calling on the C-suite.

Here's to your success. Let's get started.



Amy Franko



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THE GROWTH MINDSET AND HIGH-VALUE SALES OPPORTUNITIES

BY AMY FRANKO

Buses and Big Opportunities

There's a quote I love from Sir Richard Branson, "business opportunities are like buses, there's always another one coming."

I recently lost a big opportunity.

One of those opportunities where every sign was positive. One of those opportunities with great customer momentum; they loved my approach and the solution I had to offer. This was high value in terms of the type of work, the deal size, and the customer relationship – it would've made a big difference to my year. You know those opportunities.

The scheduled follow-up call was simply a formality in moving forward. I was excited to take this call! A short seven minutes later, the call was over and I had lost to another competitor. Why did I lose? It came down to one area where they perceived the competitor to have a more compelling expertise, and they felt more comfortable with that element of the solution. One thing. Ouch. That stings in so

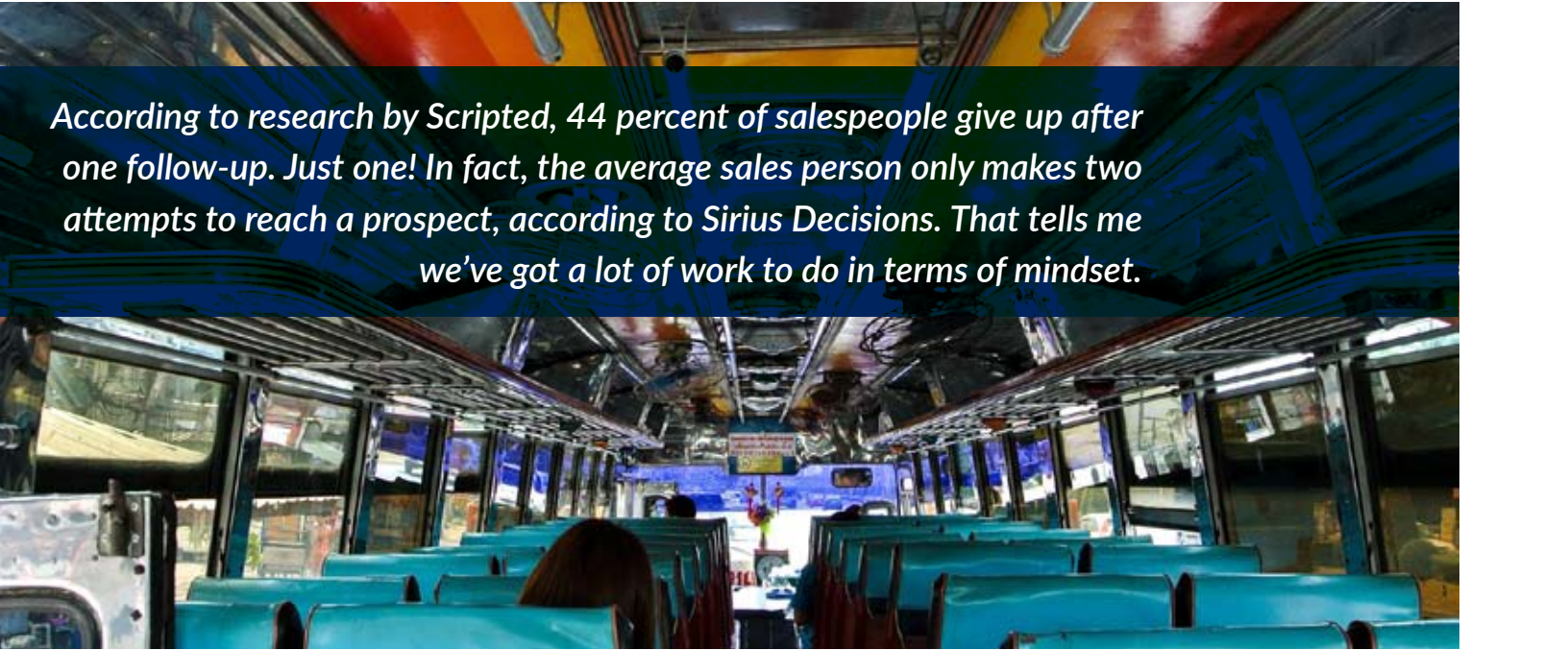
many ways. I felt like the bus had passed me by, and I missed it by a few seconds.

That was a Thursday morning.

By Friday morning, the sting was (mostly) gone. The lessons for next time taken, the relationships still strong (we're still being added to their approved solution provider list), and forward momentum to the next opportunity.

In years past, I wouldn't have recovered from that so quickly. I would've thought about it for months, dissected every little detail, and stayed in self-criticism mode for much longer. So how have I learned to handle these challenges and move forward?

Well, it's the one tool that will serve you better than any, especially in high-value, significant sales opportunities. That tool is the growth mindset, and it sets the stage for every activity, big or small, that we undertake on the path to success.



According to research by Scripted, 44 percent of salespeople give up after one follow-up. Just one! In fact, the average sales person only makes two attempts to reach a prospect, according to Sirius Decisions. That tells me we've got a lot of work to do in terms of mindset.

The Growth Mindset

A large body of mindset research, and specifically the concepts of fixed and growth mindsets, is the work of Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck. At a basic level, what we deeply believe about ourselves and how we view ourselves has a tremendous capacity to write the pages of our success. Those who embrace a growth mindset tend to believe that a person's intelligence has the capacity to grow, and therefore view experiences, feedback, and challenges as learning opportunities on the path to mastery. They don't view them as failure, or as an indication that they aren't smart. Those with a growth mindset are more likely to take risks, learn more, and develop resilience in the face of challenges or negative outcomes. In other words, they aren't defined by the outcomes.

Those who tend toward a fixed mindset take the opposite view, and therefore are often less willing to take on new challenges for fear of looking less-than-intelligent to the outside world. Because they see challenges and obstacles as things to be feared and avoided, they will steer clear of risks. Anything short of the "right answer" is a failure. Outcomes define how they see themselves, and it becomes challenging to learn from those experiences or develop the resilience necessary to move forward.

To be fair, we usually aren't just one or the other, but we fall on a spectrum that includes both mindsets. In Dweck's own learnings, it's important to "acknowledge that we're all a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets, we will probably always be, and if we want to move closer to a growth mindset in our thoughts and practices, we need to stay in touch with our fixed mindset thoughts and deeds."



Practical Ways to Cultivate a Growth Mindset

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I'm sharing several of the tools and techniques that have helped me over time to spend more time in growth mindset, to remain resilient in an ever more challenging sales world, and to be ready for the next opportunity. To help you to decide which tools may work best for you, I've organized them into some key categories.

ROUTINES

1 Create a set morning and end-of-day routine. While no day is exactly the same, the one thing my days have in common is a set morning routine for reading or writing, working out, or quiet time before the day begins. At the end of the day, it's creating my priorities for the next day and shutting down the technology.

2 Invest the first part of the workday on a top priority that moves you forward, and protect your time. This tip comes from productivity expert Kevin Kruse, who interviewed over 200 ultra-productive business leaders, entrepreneurs, athletes, and students. When I accomplish this, I find myself better able to stay in the right frame of mind. When I waste time in the morning or don't make forward progress on this one, I feel my attitude dragging and it takes significant mental and emotional effort to restore it. After a particularly rough day, I remind myself to get back at it tomorrow with something productive and meaningful first thing in the morning.

LIFELONG LEARNING

3 Identify and work from strengths. The StrengthsFinder assessment has helped me to fine tune my growth mindset by knowing what activities bring me the most energy. We each have the things that we are naturally good at; they're energizing and effortless. When we do more of those things, our energy is elevated and sustains a positive frame of mind. Pay attention to those activities that uplift you, and the ones that drag you down. Chances are that will give you great insights into your strengths, so you can find more time to do those things.

4 Invest in outside perspective. I have a professional coach, someone who not only holds me accountable to my goals and dreams, but helps me to keep perspective when things aren't going according to plan. My coach also helps me to identify emotional triggers in challenging situations. By shining a light on why I might react the way that I do in a particular situation, I can take a step back and see what's working and what's not.

5 Develop learning agility. Do you know someone who picks things up quickly no matter how complex the content or situation? That person is likely "learning agile," and their brain can organize, chunk, and prioritize information in ways that help them to quickly master a subject. The good news is that learning agility can be developed, and I highly recommend Agile Selling from Jill Konrath on this topic.

THE SALES HABIT OF WELL-BEING

6 Find ways to incorporate meditation into your life. This is new for me, as I never really put much stock into stillness or meditation. But I've found that by spending just 5-10 minutes with a guided meditation, it helps me to remain more positive and more grounded. It helps me to better handle my emotional triggers and get back to a growth mindset more quickly.

7 Sleep. There is ample research out there supporting the direct effect that sleep has on our mindset and well-being. When the brain is even moderately sleep deprived, our mental and emotional energies are negatively impacted. We're more irritable, and less able to pull ourselves out of the funk of negative outcomes. Those who are well-rested are better able to pull themselves back to a neutral or positive state more quickly and easily.

8 Exercise. Like sleep and meditation, exercise actually changes the brain's chemistry and wiring over time. Our bodies are better able to handle the stressors of daily life, and we have the physical and mental strength needed to overcome challenges and obstacles. To make this more practical for me I keep my workouts to 30 minutes, and incorporate high-intensity interval training along with strength training. I also love to get outside into nature.

9 Practice self-compassion. Most sales professionals and leaders I know are driven, ambitious, and results-oriented, traits which help us to create success in a challenging field. But those same hard-driving qualities can cause us to be really tough on ourselves, especially when the outcomes aren't what we intended. Those voices inside our heads can do more to derail us than anything else, so practicing some self-compassion goes a long way in cultivating a growth mindset. I've found it helpful to create a phrase or mantra that helps me to be kinder to myself, and I've become more aware of the words I use with myself. The kinder you are to yourself, the more you can learn to embrace learning in every opportunity, and ultimately create more success.

OUTWARD AND INWARD FOCUS

10 Do something for someone else, and get out of your own head. Focusing ourselves outward in service of others through volunteering, hand-writing those thank you notes, or doing something for someone in our network are ways to keep ourselves in the growth frame of mind.

11 Practice gratitude. Conversely, taking time to reflect on what we're grateful for in our lives is like hitting the reset button on our frame of mind. I keep a daily journal, where at the end of each day, I jot down 3-5 things I'm grateful for in that day. Another side effect of this practice is helping me to stay more aware in the present moment and actually look for the small things that make me grateful.

12 Release the outcomes. This one isn't easy, at least not for me. When we invest our time and talents into something, it's easy (and understandable) to become attached to how it's all going to turn out. But, as it turns out, if we release the expectations of the outcomes and instead focus on what we're learning in the process, we actually improve our odds of getting to our desired outcomes and enjoying the journey much more.

Implement these strategies, and continue to hone your skills and take smart risks. Soon you'll notice the difference. As Dr. Dweck said,

“SUCCESS is about being your best self, not about being better than others; failure is an opportunity, not a condemnation; EFFORT IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS.”

A PASSION FOR LEARNING UNDERLIES SALES SUCCESS

BY JEN E MILLER

TIPS FOR MAXIMIZING SALES SUCCESS BY HONING INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY AND ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

**“I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.”
- Albert Einstein**

Want a silver bullet to astounding success as a sales professional? Looking for a fail proof way to win more business? Intellectual curiosity can be the “x-factor” for you.

In fact, research by Steve W. Martin, a business author and teacher of sales strategy at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business, indicates 82 percent of top salespeople are naturally more curious than their lesser-performing counterparts.

Let’s take a look at the importance of this powerful—but often misunderstood, ill-defined and nebulous personality trait.

First, consider the difference in intellectual curiosity in a lower-performing sales professional vs. one who’s dynamite. For example, let’s say the *mediocre* sales associate hears from one of his close contacts that a CFO is announcing his retirement soon. He pauses, reflects, and says “that’s interesting,” and the conversation moves on to other topics.

The *dynamite* sales professional hears this exact same news and asks questions like, “Do a lot of people already know?” “Will he help name his successor?” “Is he retiring for good or staying on in a consulting capacity?” “Do you think he’d mind if I reach out to him before he retires?” Then, after the conversation with his contact, the dynamite sales professional calls a few key people in his network, including a personal friend who’s also a dynamite executive headhunter.

You see, the dynamite sales professional possesses intellectual curiosity in spades, and knows how to use this strength to his advantage. He leverages his high intellectual curiosity to be a visible and credible strategic partner for his current clients, his prospect clients, and his large professional network. And that ultimately benefits the business.

The good news? If you’re not already a poster child for intellectual curiosity, it’s a trait you can work to develop.



Assessing Intellectual Curiosity

Before we tackle the task of improving our individual intellectual curiosity, we must start with an assessment to know where we are today. Here are a few questions to begin understanding this trait more fully.

- 1** Do you have a natural tendency to be curious, or do you need to work hard at it?
- 2** Who do you know in your professional network who is inquisitive, curious, and clever?
- 3** Would one of these people let you shadow him or her for a day of professional development?

After you've taken a moment to reflect on these three questions, let's move on to look at these two continuums.

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being NONE and 10 being TONS, how much intellectual curiosity do you think you have, at this moment, in time in your current role/job function?



On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being NONE and 10 being TONS, how much intellectual curiosity do you want to have in the future?



In a classroom setting and in one-on-one coaching sessions with business professionals, I find it invaluable to also discuss whether we are self-aware enough to truly assess our own levels of interest and engagement in our professional lives. Or do we need to consider asking a few people close to us to make honest and fair assessments about us? Are there other questions we should be asking ourselves?

The key comes from within. You can develop and advance your intellectual curiosity score if you are passionate about your customers' businesses, your industry, your product/solution, or another facet of your role.

The Journey to Higher Intellectual Curiosity

Regardless of how you scored yourself in the assessment exercise, if you have a strong desire to strive for excellence, you will always find room for improvement. To be “off the charts” with our intellectual curiosity, we must also examine our active listening skills. Intellectual curiosity and active listening are inherently connected.

Let’s face it. Today’s environment is filled with distractions: chatty coworkers, email, meetings, an ever-buzzing phone. Researchers at the University of California, Irvine, found that the typical office worker is interrupted or switches tasks, on average, every three minutes and five seconds. What’s worse: it can take 23 minutes and 15 seconds to get back to where they left off.

(Source: Washington Post.)

It might seem next to impossible to give your undivided attention to your prospects and clients. But, don’t they deserve it?

To build your intellectual curiosity, first, you must manage or eliminate distractions. Doing so takes practice.

Stephen Covey advised that it takes 21 days to make or break a habit. What if --for the next 21 days—you implemented the following practices into your sales routine:

- Use only a notebook and pen when meeting with prospects and clients.
- Leave your cell phone, tablet, laptop, and other gizmos in the car, in the briefcase, or even back at your desk.
- Wear a watch to keep track of the time, so you could give your eye contact, your focus, and your attention on the person speaking with you.



Imagine all the possibilities of practicing active listening and enhancing your own intellectual curiosity by simply removing the distractions. To maximize your sales success, spend time honing these skills – you will not regret the invest you make in yourself.

Three things to do immediately to focus on intellectual curiosity

1 **READ** 212: *The Extra Degree* by Sam Parker. It's a quick read with a powerful message. This book will inspire you to push harder and achieve more in both your personal and professional life.

2 **TAKE MORE NOTES.** Practice better notetaking with both current clients and prospects. Reflect on what you've heard and learned, try to connect the dots and think strategically like an executive would. Taking more notes, the old-fashioned way pen to paper, is a surprisingly easy way to sharpen your concentration and increase your ability to listen well.

3 **ASK MORE QUESTIONS.** You can improve your own intellectual curiosity by genuinely asking questions in many situations to explore further, learn more, and clarify your understanding. Ask questions of your colleagues. Ask questions when you are with your clients. Ask questions when you are prospecting. If genuine and sincere, your inquisitiveness will be received favorably by those you interact with. It will differentiate you from your competition. It will help you build stronger professional relationships. It will help you win more business.



You can improve your own intellectual curiosity by genuinely asking questions in many situations to explore further, learn more, and clarify your understanding.

SHOW UP FOR SALES SUCCESS

BY BRITTANY SHONKA

“80 percent of life is just showing up. THE REST IS WHAT YOU DO WHEN YOU GET THERE.”

“80 percent of life is just showing up.” Many of us have heard at least one iteration of this famous Woody Allen quote. But have you ever considered its meaning? Are these famous words relevant to the modern B2B sales professional?

Yes. And more than ever before.

I know what you’re thinking. “But, Brittany, it’s been nearly 40 years since those words were spoken! In that time, the world as we know it has been revolutionized by advancing technology, globalization, the emergence of the Internet, and more!” And you’re right to point it out. The world has changed, significantly, creating a whole new reality of what it takes to be a successful salesperson in the 21st century.

That’s why this iconic quote needs a little enhancement. So, in the remainder of this blog post, I’ll ask you to instead consider:

“80 percent of life is just showing up. [The rest is what you do when you get there].”

Let’s break it down.



Showing Up - the 80 Percent

More and more, people today simply don't "show up," whether mentally, physically, or both. Well-intended sales professionals – in the face of lots to do and not enough time to do it – find their efforts and attention pulled in various directions. Focus on any one thing is challenged. Ironically, with higher quotas and less time to hit them, it's common to find ourselves sitting in front of a computer thinking the answer lies in more emails and RFP responses. But that won't get you to the next level.

Those of us with the desire and discipline to do things differently, to truly "show up," can distance ourselves from the competition. So, where to begin? Let's consider "showing up" in the context of two distinct areas.

THE POWER OF PRESENCE

Get your head in the game. Your mental presence equates to a desire to take full advantage of the opportunities put in front of you, large or small. This establishes the foundation for success.

As my colleague Amy Franko discussed in her previous post about mindset, it begins with a morning routine and setting priorities.

Consider the way you spend the first hour of your workday. Do you:

1. Take some time to settle in – catching up on the latest in the news/on social over coffee, reading and responding to whatever emails have come in, etc. – eventually checking to see what's on your calendar for the day
2. Jump right in with your plan of attack, having already familiarized yourself with the day's schedule & established key priorities the night before
3. Fall somewhere in between, depending on the day?

What about your mental approach to selling? When trying to reach a decision maker, for example – do you shoot off an email and hope for the best? Or do you actually pick up the phone? "Showing up" mentally means getting outside our comfort zones and selecting the course of action with the highest probability of success.

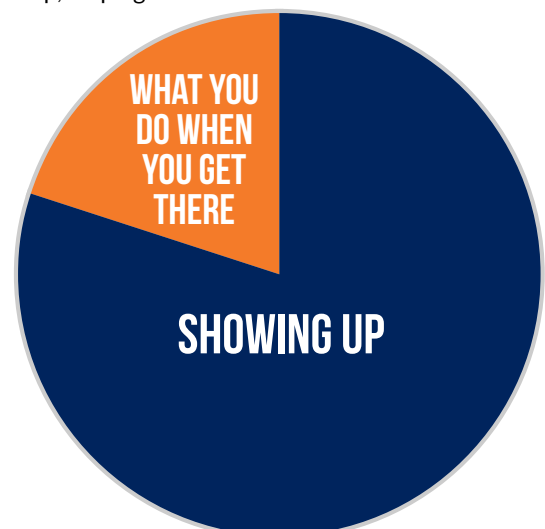
In a day and age where numerous people and issues are vying for our attention at any given time, dedicating our full focus to just one is rare. Think webinar participation or conference calls, for example. Is anyone else guilty of intending to pay full attention, then seeing an email notification pop up and getting caught up in their inbox for the next 30 minutes? Multi-tasking doesn't work. No matter what's on your plate, avoiding distraction to be fully present will create better results.

GET PHYSICAL

Not surprisingly, sometimes "showing up" means actually showing up.

Just recently, my company was invited to make a presentation for a sizeable new business opportunity, along with a four other competitors. Given the nature of our business and the importance of this potential opportunity, we pushed to show up and present our value in-person, instead of over the web. We were the only ones to do so.

Whether it's because of busyness, laziness, fear, or a myriad of other factors, most people don't show up anymore. Those of you who do are ahead of the game. While it may not always make sense (due to budget, logistics, etc.), the fact is we can often create a stronger, more distinct impression when we show up, helping to increase our effectiveness.



The Other 20 Percent

Now that we're mentally and physically present, it's time to step it up and stand out. But what does excellence really look like? I've identified three areas we should be pushing ourselves above and beyond.

Research Meeting Preparation in 3 Steps

Everyone knows we should prepare for every sales call. Yet most don't! Despite good intentions, life happens. We get busy; things come up. Before you know it, we're walking into a discovery meeting having done zero preparation.

It doesn't have to be time consuming. In fact, good preparation can be done in as little as 5-10 minutes. When preparing for your call, focus on three simple steps:

1. **Hit the person's LinkedIn profile.** Aim to gather a brief background on the individual you'll be speaking to.
2. **Visit the company's website** or company LinkedIn page (or both). The goal is to become familiar with enough about their business to do step #3.
3. **Develop 3-4 good questions** to guide the flow of your call. What are the key things you want to learn? Having this purpose in mind will help you make the best use of your time.



PRESENTATION FOCUS: IT'S ALL ABOUT THEM

After years of learning the hard way, developing more effective sales presentations is a topic near and dear to my heart. At the most basic level, so many sales professionals deliver the same corporate pitch over and over again (they're showing up – it's the 80 percent). Yet how many decision makers are compelled by these corporate presentations all about us and our products and services? Not many.



CUSTOMIZE EACH SALES PRESENTATION TO BE RELEVANT FOR THAT SPECIFIC CUSTOMER

Go above and beyond; consider your audience and tailor your content to incorporate what matters to them and their business. That's where you become compelling; that's the 20 percent.



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

I recently facilitated a training session with a diverse group of sales professionals. Some people in the group clearly put in rehearsal effort and delivered great presentations; others did not. If a lack of rehearsal was glaringly obvious to everyone participating in a simple exercise, imagine how clear it'd be to a customer in the real world?

Rehearsal is key, and there are a few ways we can do it better:


1. **In-role and out loud.** You never truly know what you're going to say until you say it. Avoid the temptation to simply flick through slides while reviewing talking points in your head. Instead, rehearse your presentation out loud as if you were in front of the customer.
2. **With others or on camera.** Trust me, I know how uncomfortable it can be to make yourself vulnerable to others (or even tougher, yourself). None of us particularly enjoys facing our own weaknesses or insecurities. But, do you really want the first run of your presentation to be when you're live with the customer? Once you're able to get past the initial discomfort, you'll benefit from both feedback and confidence that will ultimately help you make a better presentation.
3. **Follow the 4:1:4 ratio.** For every one time you rehearse the presentation in full, practice the beginning and the end four more times. It sounds like overkill, but following this ratio will help you nail the two most important parts of your presentation – a strong open and compelling close.



Let's close the book on this topic. As sales professionals, we have great jobs, and the majority of us do them well. We know the importance of not just showing up (the 80 percent), but getting ahead by delivering that extra 20 percent. To help you put intention into practice, consider implementing the following challenge action items.

Challenge: Show Up Strong

- 1 For the next month, dedicate 5-10 minutes preparing before every single call.
- 2 For your next two presentations, rehearse in-role, out loud. Get some feedback on it from someone else, and focus on really nailing the opening and the close. Afterwards, do a little self-reflection to see if your hard work improved your outcome.
- 3 Stretch your comfort zones by trying something new. For example, if you prefer to schedule appointments via email, challenge yourself to pick up the phone (or use LinkedIn). If you always have calls remotely, schedule a face-to-face.

A woman in a business suit is standing and presenting to an audience in a meeting room. She is gesturing with her hands as she speaks. In the foreground, the silhouettes of two people sitting at a table are visible, looking towards the presenter. A flip chart on an easel stands to the right of the presenter. The room is brightly lit, and the overall atmosphere is professional and focused.

You get the idea. Challenging ourselves to get outside our comfort zones creates excellence. The 20 percent.

IN THE KNOW

BY BRITTANY SHONKA

Understanding Your Customer

As B2B sales professionals selling value, understanding the customer is one of the single most important factors to success, both in terms of the customer partnership and to us, personally. Yet when a recent Forrester survey asked executive buyers if sales people were prepared for their meeting by being knowledgeable about the executive's specific business, 75 percent responded "no."

If understanding the customer is critical, but three in four of us are still missing the mark with key decision makers, we've got a long way to go as a profession.

Why Is Understanding the Customer Important?

Prior to joining IMPAX, I was actually in a client role at two different organizations. From my very first exposure to B2B sales, the importance of understanding one's customer – truly understanding their business, not just their solution needs – was introduced and reinforced to the point it became thematic. The message I heard then, and consequently live by now, is the first premise of the IMPAX Process. It reads like this:

"Senior-level decision makers are more likely to buy because of what you know about them and their business than what they know about you and your product specifications."

This is true now more than ever.

In a time when procurement is on the rise and sales is increasingly being devalued and commoditized, value leaders know how important it is to get to the people who can truly buy value. These decision makers are located higher in the customer organization and have no time to waste listening to a sales rep present the features, cost and benefits of their products or solutions.

If we're going to sell value effectively to those who can actually buy it, we had better be prepared to reflect an understanding of what truly matters to them – their business objectives, strategies and issues, and how partnership would help support them to attain their objectives.

If understanding the customer is critical, but three in four of us are still missing the mark with key decision makers, we've got a long way to go as a profession.

4 Areas of Focus

We know that to be successful, we've got to understand the customer. But, what does that really mean?

Let's break it down. As sales professionals, there are four key areas we should research to gain well-rounded insight into a company: solution or application knowledge, business or strategic knowledge, the competitive situation, and our customer relationships.

1 SOLUTION / APPLICATION RESEARCH

This is where the majority of us excel and feel most comfortable. Solution / application research gets to understanding the "needs" of the customer in relation to the products and services we offer. When conducting this type of research, our goal is to understand the customer's current state, the solution they currently have in place, and their desired future state. Also key, we want to learn how the customer wants (or needs) to further develop from the current state solution. Securing this information allows us to properly qualify the opportunity and discern the strength of our solution to the customer's needs.

2 BUSINESS / STRATEGIC RESEARCH

For B2B sales professionals needing to sell value beyond product and price, wider research on the business in its entirety is essential. When gathering business / strategic knowledge, we want to get a sense for the customer's past, their current state, and where they're looking to go in the future. Particularly as it pertains to their desired future state, we want to learn about their critical business objectives, key strategies for attaining them, and issues they may be addressing along the way. Doing this research allows us to begin tying ourselves to the customer's critical business outcomes, helping to position us as a trusted advisor.

3 COMPETITIVE SITUATION

To create an optimal competitive sales strategy, we need to understand the other players in the picture. Which of our competitors are also in the running? Of those competitors, what are their different strengths and weaknesses? Who are they aligned with? How are they known to compete? Asking these questions and learning the answers will help us conceptualize how the competition stacks up against us and one another, and more importantly, how we can set ourselves apart from the rest.

4 RELATIONSHIPS

This one pertains specifically to B2B account management. Are our products or services meeting their needs as expected? Are they receiving the support they need from customer service? How are their relationships with the account team? Even more importantly, we need to understand the value being created for and with the customer. Keeping a beat on these things helps us to retain and grow customer relationships.

Research Matters

Now that we've highlighted the four most important areas we should be learning about, let's touch on how we can research these four key components. To me, there are two key categories: data (publicly available information) and people (contacts or coaches you may have).



DATA

Data is undervalued these days. It's overlooked. Easy access to the internet made available by smartphones and tablets has made data so readily available at a moment's notice, that fewer and fewer of us seem to take it seriously.

New sources, sites and social media platforms are seemingly popping up by the day, which can help us better understand key individuals and the company's current state and business direction. With a few taps of a screen, we can quickly: scan an analyst review for real-time business and industry information; check out Twitter to gauge customer sentiment regarding the company and its products or services; and read the latest news and updates about a company (as well as employee and customer reaction or engagement with them).

Our ability to access this amount of information is more instrumental than ever. Leveraging key sources of data helps us research in-person more effectively, differentiate ourselves from others in our space, and deliver presentations that are more compelling to decision makers. People rarely review their own organization's materials anymore (annual reports, newsletters, etc.). If we do, we gain a huge advantage and distinguish ourselves from the competition.

PEOPLE

On its own, gathering data won't get us where we need to be. In addition to data, we need to gain insights about the state of the business and future direction. This perspective can be learned from doing research with actual people who have some sort of dealing with or familiarity with the target company. The vehicle for gathering this information is a research meeting (or sales interview).

We're not talking about simply conducting a "needs analysis". In addition to understanding where and how our products fit, we want wider perspective about the business as a whole. This means tapping into our networks to find people inside AND outside the decision process to call on. Professional contacts in other parts of the business, friends, former employees, fellow sales professionals – anyone who knows the company well can be a great source of information. As a salesperson, one of your most valuable assets is your professional network; use it!

The more effectively we conduct research meetings with various contacts and coaches at a target account, the better our ability to position our value and the fit. Truly understanding our customer means grasping their business and needs, identifying and accessing the right people in their organization.

How Can We Best Leverage Our Understanding?

Let's dig a little deeper on how this research can be leveraged:

SHORTENING THE SALES CYCLE. It would be easy to worry that spending more time on the research phase of the sales process would actually lengthen the cycle overall. In all actuality, by taking a little more time and effort up front to build our understanding of the customer and opportunity, it allows us to close much more efficiently and effectively.

OPTIMIZING YOUR EFFORTS TOWARD OPPORTUNITIES THAT CAN BE WON. Conducting more effective research early-on allows you to qualify whether or not an opportunity is viable. If, through your research, you learn the probability of success is low, it allows you to spend precious time, energy and resources on other pursuits.

BUILDING CREDIBILITY WITH CUSTOMERS AND PROSPECTS. When sales professionals spend the time and effort on truly researching a company's business, the quality and depth of their knowledge makes a powerful impact, particularly with higher-level decision makers and key stakeholders in the customer's organization.

STRENGTHENING CUSTOMER POSITIONING. Salespeople who put the effort into learning not only product or solution needs, but the entire business from the customer's perspective, position themselves as a true resource to customers. Beyond someone who can make a simple solution recommendation, this research allows us to become a strategic resource and trusted advisor to customers.

DELIVERING EFFECTIVE SALES PRESENTATIONS. We all feel we're "customer-focused," but do our presentations to customers really reflect this? When the content focuses primarily on the details of our products and services, it's nearly impossible to be compelling. Instead, delivering a powerful presentation means our message reflects on what really matters to key decision makers. We must convey an understanding of the customer's current state, future objectives, key strategies and critical issues, then define how, working together, we can support them.

DIFFERENTIATING YOURSELF FROM THE COMPETITION. In a day and age where differences among competing products or solutions (and prices) may be minimal at best, many value-leaders are looking to distinguish themselves from their competitors. As a sales professional who takes the time to understand your customer's vision and how your partnership can support it, you set yourself apart from the competition simply by the way in which you sell.

Challenge: Strengthen Your Customer Understanding

Let's wrap up this topic by proposing some challenge action items to help you strengthen your customer understanding immediately.

FOR A KEY CUSTOMER OR PROSPECT OPPORTUNITY ON YOUR LIST:



Dedicate 10-15 minutes solely to gathering data. Consult any variety of publicly-available resources that can help deepen your understanding – for additional challenge, consider leveraging a source you may not have used before, like Twitter or LinkedIn.



Schedule at least two research meetings with contacts not directly linked to the decision process. Use these meetings as an opportunity to gain insight about aspects of the company's business direction as a whole.

FOR A HEALTHY PIPELINE, START WITH STRATEGIC PROSPECTING

BY AMY FRANKO

Never underestimate the benefit of a good mentor.

Early in my sales career, I was fortunate enough to be mentored by a seasoned member of our company's team. He happened to be a top-notch prospector. I remember, only half-jokingly, telling him how glad I was that he was on my side, because I'd never want to encounter him prospecting for the competition.

Think about the top-performers you know. If you spend a day in their life, it's likely you'll recognize a common theme. They are constantly tending to the quality and quantity of opportunities in their pipeline.

Entrepreneur Jim Rohn said,
**“MOTIVATION is what gets
you started. HABIT is what
keeps you going.”**

TWO HABITS FORM THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

For those of us in sales, motivation is usually something we've got in spades. Our habits are what separate us from the crowd.

When it comes to pipeline management, two habits are central to success:

Balanced Prospecting and daily pipeline management.

Let's first define pipeline management. It is the uncovering of opportunities in either net-new accounts, or existing accounts where you want to continue to create barriers for your competition.

Gone are the days of dedicated hunters or farmers; every sales professional must be strong at prospecting across the full field of opportunities.

That leaves a lot of ground to cover. How can you strategically narrow your targets?

I'm a believer in prospecting on quality first and then quantity. This is especially true in high-value, consultative sales opportunities. You've got to do a lot of homework on target accounts, building relationships with decision makers and other buyer roles, understanding your organization's fit with that client, and determining the lifetime value of the account.

When I launched Impact Instruction Group almost a decade ago, I was building a brand from scratch while simultaneously creating demand for my company's products and services. In other words, I had to get out there to create new relationships and prospect.

Six Essentials for Growing a Healthy Pipeline

- 1 Get comfortable with the uncomfortable.** In his book *Fanatical Prospecting*, Jeb Blount calls prospecting an interruption to someone's day. That hard truth leaves us vulnerable to fear and rejection. I'd be lying if I said it goes away. I'm never over the discomfort that comes with that fear of rejection. But I'm aware of it, and I remember that the discomfort is only temporary. It's all part of our day's work, and that's OK. Learn lessons along the way, move on, and don't dwell on the negative.
- 2 Balance your approaches.** Outbound and inbound. We all have our preferred methods of uncovering opportunities and relationships, usually based on our strengths. For me, I'm a strong writer, and so I gravitate toward email and social selling. What I've learned though, is that a balanced approach is typically best. When we eliminate one entire form of opportunity identification, we aren't maximizing our results. With that in mind, I've made an effort to include more phone prospecting to balance out my strengths. There also needs to be a balance between outbound and inbound. In the early days of Impact Instruction Group, there was no inbound! It was all outbound efforts to build relationships. It sometimes feels like the easier road to allow inbound marketing to work its magic. But then again, opportunity identification isn't magic – it's the combination of communication approaches (email, phone, social) and sourcing (outbound, inbound).
- 3 Create high-value forums.** This may be the strategy that has delivered the highest return on investment and relationship success in my experience. I've created quarterly forums for thought leaders and decision makers in my space, bringing them together over lunch to discuss challenges, best practices, and trends in the industry. That alone has helped to position me as a thought leader, and over time has generated a strong return with high-value opportunities.

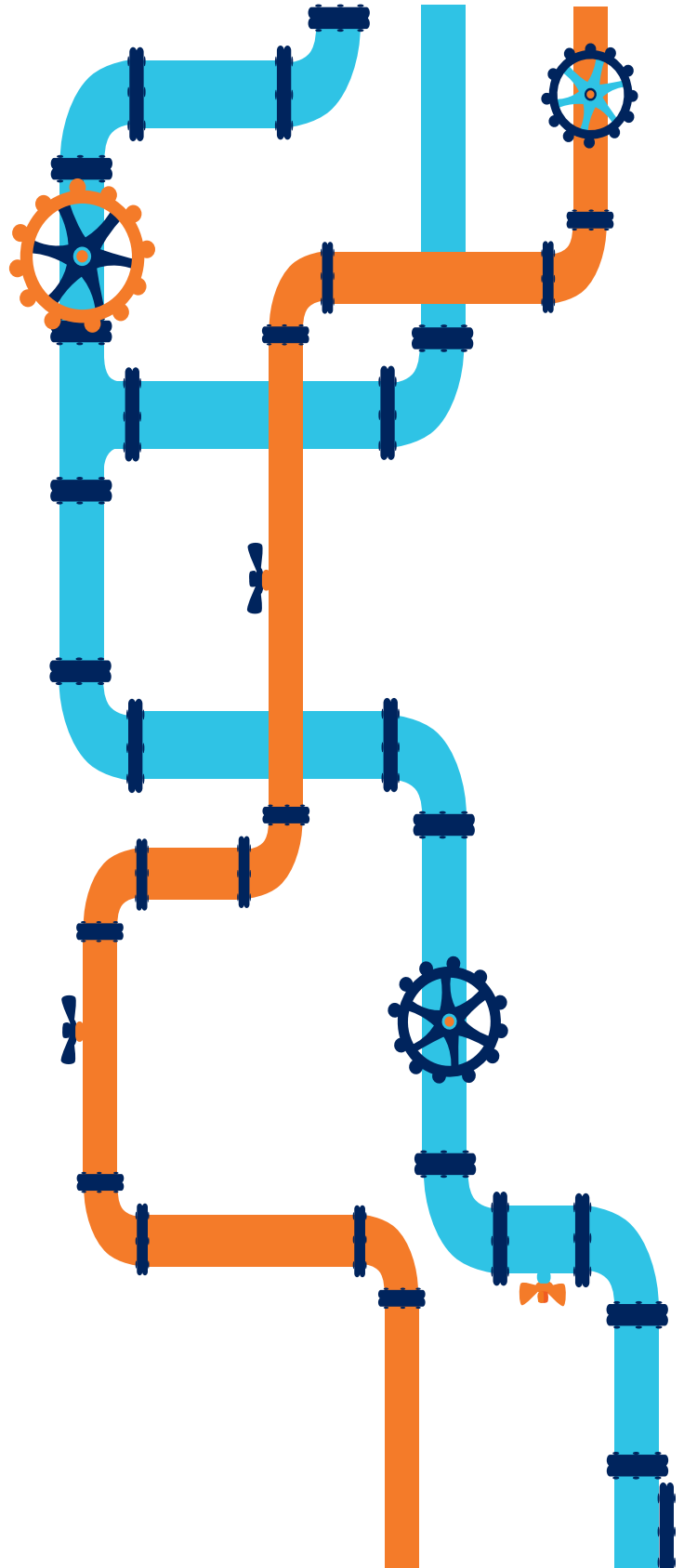
4 Develop routines to future-proof your pipeline.

When I have a number of key opportunities I'm working on at a given time, something interesting happens. I spend less time uncovering new opportunities. It's a common dilemma – work on what's hot at the moment, or work on what will pay off in the future? I've learned the value of balancing both, because when I stop uncovering new opportunities today, it hurts three or six months down the road. Future-proofing my pipeline means I need to have a consistent routine for prospecting. You'll see all kinds of guidance on how to do this. What works well for me is to set aside three days a week where I prospect for an hour or two. That establishes the routine I need to keep the future top of mind, while still providing time for working through the existing opportunities and maintaining current clients.

5 Create an impactful first meeting or phone call.

When all of the work has been done to secure that first meeting or phone call, it's time to shine. Unfortunately, I've seen many sales professionals struggle with the first meeting, because they simply aren't prepared and don't enter the meeting with the right mindset or commitment goals. Don't make the mistake of flying by the seat of your pants. The research conducted ahead of your first meeting will set the stage for gaining further commitments from the client and moving opportunities forward.

- 6 Avoid the chase.** I'm a competitive, type-A personality, so new opportunities feed my competitive spirit. The shadow side to that is that I can get wrapped up in the chase, continuing to pursue avenues that ultimately don't serve me or my clients. I've slowly learned to back off from the chase, and that has made a noticeable difference. It has lowered my stress levels, created more time to cultivate higher-value opportunities, and actually helped me to close more opportunities at higher margins.



Becoming a Leader of Your Own Pipeline

Pipeline is a funny thing, because it's easy for the pipeline to look better than it is. It's sometimes tough to acknowledge the truth that our pipelines aren't as healthy as they could be. Knowing the health and value of your opportunity pipeline is first about your numbers.

- Do you know the number of opportunities you currently have?
- Do you know your average deal size?
- What is your close ratio?
- What is the overall profitability of your deals?
- How long have they been in the pipeline before closing?

I keep data on every opportunity all year long, and I refer back to that data to help me uncover patterns in my pipeline. For example:

- Where are opportunities getting stuck?
- Which opportunities closed quickly and why? (I'd like to replicate more of those!)
- Which opportunities had the highest profitability?
- What types of services are my clients gravitating toward?
- Have I been able to sell add-on services to extend the engagement?

I'll share some interesting trends I've uncovered in tracking my pipeline:

- It's often the deals that closed quickly and easily that were the most profitable and the most rewarding.
- The deals where I've felt like I'm giving chase or trying to force a fit, are the ones that are often the most difficult to close. And when they do, they are the most challenging (and draining) to deliver on, and they're often the least profitable.
- When I've unclogged my pipeline and been honest about deals that are NEVER going to close, it helped jump start my prospecting activities. Giving myself permission to close the books on those low-odds opportunities opened up space for better opportunities.

Growing a healthy pipeline takes time and thought. But if you follow these steps and regularly track your efforts, you'll find more, qualified prospects ready and waiting for your business to help them tackle their toughest challenges.



BREAKING THROUGH TO C-SUITE BUYERS

BY JEN E MILLER

In 2008, while in Singapore for business, an officer within my company at the time facilitated an introduction for me with a prominent global leader from a Fortune 500 company, who happened to be in the same country at the same time. The leader willingly took a meeting with me because he knew and trusted the person requesting his time. What a pivotal moment in my career. It wasn't the meeting that was significant. It's **how** the meeting was arranged that's important in the story. It completely solidified for me my understanding of selling, buying, trust, credibility, professional networks, and how all of these elements are critically linked together, actually inseparable, when we want to gain and keep access to executive leaders.

For many of us, calling on the C-Suite can be mysterious, daunting, and nerve-racking – even if we've been doing it for years. What if we could demystify the process, distill the plethora of information and opinions that exist, and simplify the strategies we need to be successful?

First, let's make sure we are all on the same page with the terminology.

Most major organizations employ several key leaders with "C" titles – Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Operations Officer, and the like.

It's surprising how many sales professionals don't know what someone means when he or she refers to the C-Suite. Those who do often consider it the Holy Grail.

The challenge isn't a new one. For their 2010 book *Selling to the C-Suite*, Nicholas A.C. Read and Stephen J. Bistriz, Ed.D. conducted in-depth interviews with executive-level decision makers of more than 500 organizations. Here's the good news. They learned that leaders at the highest corporate levels don't avoid sales pitches; in fact, they welcome them—provided the salesperson approaches them the right way.

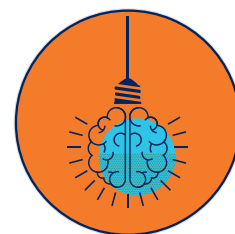
Before you launch your next call on the C-Suite, ensure you're prepared to be successful by leveraging these tips.

*It wasn't the meeting
that was significant.*

**It's HOW the meeting
was arranged that's
important in the story.**

*It completely solidified for me my
understanding of selling, buying,
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access to executive leaders.*

Determine the Decision Maker



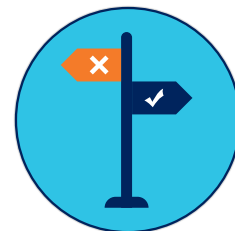
There's a chance your product, service or solution can be bought by lower-titled individuals. Be honest with yourself, and take a good look at what you are selling.

Early in my sales career, the leadership team for the organization I represented was pushing me hard to get access to CEOs and presidents. I was young and inexperienced and didn't even consider taking a step back to confirm whether I actually needed C-Suite access to get the win. But, being a young professional, I did as told, and booked tons of appointments with top-level leaders. As it turns out, for that product, I didn't need access to the C-Suite. Often my prospects were confused why I was there, as others, usually much lower in their organization, had budget and authority to buy what I was selling. I was wasting their time.

I knew how to secure the appointment, but didn't know what I was supposed to do once I got there. If I would have worked smarter, and performed more research about the buying processes within my target markets, I could have won more business faster. I would have used my time more effectively, and booked appointments that would have been meaningful and productive.

When you are evaluating your prospect customers, and doing research about them specifically and their market in general, ask questions that will lead you to understand who the decision maker is for your particular product, solution or service. Remember, it's not always the person who signs the contract. And, it might not be the title you were assuming it was. Asking about how similar decisions were made in the past, or about other comparable suppliers and where they interact within the buyer's organization could help you clarify if being at the C-level is a must for you to secure new business. Sales professionals who prioritize determining who the key decision maker is early in the sales cycle within each prospect opportunity, and then plan a sales strategy accordingly, are well on their way to securing new clients faster than those who do not focus on this vital element.

Learn to Think Like an Executive



When we learn how to think like an executive, we earn the right to be in the C-Suite. The conversation drastically shifts from "price per unit" to "strategic fit," and how a partnership between the two organizations would benefit the prospect company. Thinking like an executive will gain you credibility, access and respect.

Most senior leaders are focused on growing revenue, increasing profits, expanding market share, controlling costs, executing on their multi-year strategic business plan, or some combination thereof. For each of your prospects, do you know enough about their business direction and goals to engage in meaningful and productive dialogue

with the business leaders? What additional research could you do to make sure the conversation is about their business and not your own agenda? Once you learn about their business direction, it is your job to paint the vision of the strategic business fit that could exist if you were to do business together.

At the C-Suite level, trust and credibility are paramount, and should not be overlooked as key factors to success. It could be easy to minimize the importance of these two elements, and accidentally think that your product/service/solution superiority (or at least your perception of its superiority) would compensate or be enough to earn their attention and interest.

Build a Strategic Network

If you are mindful of drastically increasing your success when interacting with C-Suite leaders, there are a few things you can tactically do now to improve your odds in the near future. Start by building a strong, strategic network of trusted professionals from whom you can seek advice, receive some informal career coaching, and discuss prospecting efforts. By focusing on your own development as a sales professional, you become part of the elite – those who dedicate themselves to their craft and fully embrace the journey to sales mastery.

1 Find someone (in your direct network or perhaps as an introduction through a mutual connection) who can act as a mentor for you at this moment in your career. Ideally, this person has been an executive leader or is one currently. Don't overlook a retired executive as a person who can play this role. Share candidly with the person you identify that you are looking for coaching and discussion on how to better interact with C-level professionals as it relates to your current role in sales. Some "ah ha" moments are sure to ensue after just a few phone or in-person meetings.

2 Ask a trusted sales leader (might not be your direct supervisor) to shadow you on several C-Suite prospect meetings and offer you candid feedback about what he or she observes on the appointments. Depending on your current assignment and reporting structure this might be difficult to execute. Another approach could be to shadow a sales professional as he or she conducts meetings at this level—and then emulate strategies.

3 Call C-level leaders at your current customers and ask them to reflect on what it is they value from the professional relationship they have with you specifically, and the partnership with your company more broadly. This of course only works well if you already know C-level leaders within your client base.

ANSWER KEY QUESTIONS

As a final take-away, I'll leave you with three questions to ask yourself when calling on the C-Suite at any of your prospects.

- 1** Who is the executive I'm trying to meet with, and why?
- 2** How will I secure an appointment with him or her?
- 3** What will be my goal of the meeting?

Knowing the answers will empower you to breakthrough to top executives. With just a little time and attention to the topic of C-Suite selling, you can gain credibility and launch ahead of the competition.

About the Authors



Amy Franko | Founder & President | Impact Instruction Group

Amy Franko drives results for organizations by elevating their most important asset—their people. Her firm, Impact Instruction Group, works with technology companies and professional services firms to design and deliver leadership development and strategic selling programs.

Amy's experience within large global organizations, such as IBM and Lenovo, has shaped her skills as a futuristic thinker and leader. She brings new perspectives to her clients, with a sharp focus on achieving strategic goals.

Known for her dynamic and engaging style, Amy is a sought-after speaker on the topic of leadership development and strategic selling, having delivered her powerful messages across the country. Her expertise is widely shared on social networks, and in respected publications such as Chief Learning Officer, TD Magazine, Training Industry, Training Magazine, Columbus CEO, and Smart Business. She is a certified training partner through IMPAX Corporation.

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Jen E Miller | Senior Vice President, Producer Development | Marsh & McLennan Agency

Jen E Miller is passionate about sales strategy. With over 18 years in sales, sales training, and sales leadership roles, she truly loves helping professionals and leaders exceed sales objectives. To Jen, sales strategy is like a giant chess board. She helps teams determine which tactical moves to make- and in what sequence- in order to best achieve the desired goal of winning a new client. Jen motivates and inspires teams to provide exceptional service to their customers, prospects, and company.

Jen joined Marsh & McLennan Agency two years ago. Coming most recently from DHL, she worked with teams around the world to build sales culture and implement sales methodology.

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Brittany Shonka | Consultant | IMPAX Corporation

Brittany Shonka has a passion for helping clients drive growth through sales excellence. Her position is two-fold: half focused on B2B marketing, and half focused on client training and facilitation.

On the marketing side, Brittany creates a more relevant, dynamic digital and social presence for IMPAX, ultimately driving more business leads and building brand awareness. These efforts target senior level decision makers looking to optimize their sales team's performance, helping them to connect with IMPAX, a partner who can assist in taking their team to the next level.

On the training and facilitation side, Brittany trains and coaches value-leading organizations on the IMPAX Process, an end-to-end sales methodology for effective sales and account management. She helps clients fight commoditization and differentiate themselves competitively through the way in which they sell, shifting the focus from price and earning credibility at the executive level.

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