

For: Sales
Enablement
Professionals

The Failing School System For B2B Sellers

by Norbert Kriebel, November 22, 2013

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Executive Buyers Vote With Their Wallets

Executive buyers in the “do-more-with-less” economy are voting with their wallets by choosing which salespeople they will engage and share important information with.

Sellers Need To Be Better Equipped

Regardless of business or IT role, altitude level, or geography, executive buyers feel sellers are best equipped to discuss their company and products, and that's it.

Focus On The Buyer's Needs

Considering that executives focus on solving problems, most of the agenda for a meeting with them should be about those executive buyers, their companies, their roles, and their challenges.



The Failing School System For B2B Sellers

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WHY READ THIS REPORT

Your buyers have changed, and there are some things you should know about them if you expect to get any money out of their wallets. If you're accountable for helping your company achieve its revenue goals, you should know that whatever you're doing to prepare your sellers for meetings with executive buyers isn't working.

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Forrester surveyed 418 global senior-level executives who are involved in purchasing technology products or services and who work in companies with 100 or more employees.

Related Research Documents

[Understanding The Reality Of Your Sales Force](#)

February 28, 2013

[Introduction To The Value Equation Framework](#)

November 29, 2012

[Engineering Valuable Sales Conversations](#)

November 12, 2008

ATTRIBUTES OF SELLER PREPARATION FOR EXECUTIVE MEETINGS

Executive buyers today exert more control over the business-to-business (B2B) selling process than ever before. Executive buyers in the “do-more-with-less” economy are voting with their wallets by choosing which salespeople they will engage and share important information with. A consistent theme we hear from executive leaders in marketing and sales, sales management, and sales trainers is simply, “We need our salespeople to be prepared.” “Prepared to do what?” is the logical next question, and one we don’t hear often. To help, Forrester created an inventory of the range of information that B2B companies commonly impart — or attempt to impart — to their salespeople to share in meetings. That information falls into these categories:

- **Information about their company and products.** This includes founding date, history, executive leadership, acquisition history, number of employees, revenues, geographic presence, mission statement, product suites, current products, coming products, and features and functions.
- **Information about customers’ industries.** This includes government regulation, current economic dynamics, competitive environment, primary customers or customer types, and key suppliers.
- **Information about customers’ specific business.** This includes revenue and performance, growth strategy, important competitors, key markets, geographical presence, and core offerings.
- **Information about customers’ roles and responsibilities.** This includes background of their role, their current business responsibilities, pressures from their leaders, and challenges they have with peers and direct reports.
- **Information about customers’ issues and where salespeople can help.** This includes information on the daily problems stakeholders face and how the seller’s offerings map to solving those problems.
- **Responses to questions that customers may ask.** These include a list of frequently asked questions that similar buyers (i.e., buyers in the same role, altitude, industry, etc.) have also asked.
- **Relevant examples or case studies to share with customers.** These include case studies, reference accounts, recent engagements, known pitfalls, and customer testimonials.

Sellers Are Equipped On Their Company And Products

To get a baseline of how effective sellers are in communicating these types of knowledge or information to buyers, we surveyed over 400 executive buyers and asked how well they thought sellers communicated across these items (see Figure 1). Sellers are clearly well equipped to discuss their company and products, but that's where the good news stops. Sellers are far less well equipped to communicate the other six categories of information in conversations with executive buyers.

Business And IT Executives See Things The Same Way . . .

It doesn't matter whether executive buyers are in an IT or business role; they think sellers are best equipped to discuss their company and products, and that's it (see Figure 2).¹

. . . Regardless Of Their Altitude . . .

The same pattern applies for altitude with one very important exception — the higher level the buyer, the lower the grades (see Figure 3). This makes sense when you consider that C-level executives are far more focused on the ongoing results and performance of their business, rather than getting into the minutiae of any specific product or service.

. . . Or The Country They Operate In

Separating the responses of executives by the nine countries from which they hail, we see that the basic pattern does not change, with the exception of China (see Figure 4). This result can be explained by “face saving” nature of China's culture — to avoid incurring or inflicting disgrace — and hence sellers there are judged less critically than in other countries.²

Figure 1 How Equipped Are Sellers For Conversations With Executive Buyers?

SALES PREPARATION REPORT CARD	
GRADE SCALE: % of executives who responded sellers are usually prepared in the following ways. A = 90%-100% D = 60%-69% B = 80%-89% F = <60% C = 70%-79%	GRADES All executives (N = 418)
Knowledgeable about their company and products	C ⁺
Knowledgeable about my industry	F
Knowledgeable about my specific business	F
Can relate to my role and responsibilities in the organization	F
Understands my issues and where they can help	F
Prepared for the questions that I ask	F
Has relevant examples or case studies to share with me	F
<p>COMMENTS: <i>Salesperson shows proficiency in products classwork. Please focus on other areas.</i></p>	
<p>Base: executive-level buyers at global companies with 100 or more employees Source: Q4 2012 Global Executive Buyer Insight Online Survey</p>	

Figure 2 How Equipped Are Sellers For Conversations With Executive Buyers? By Department

SALES PREPARATION REPORT CARD			
GRADE SCALE: % of executives who responded sellers are usually prepared in the following ways. A = 90%-100% D = 60%-69% B = 80%-89% F = <60% C = 70%-79%	GRADES		
	All buyers (N = 418)	IT buyers (N = 204)	Business buyers (N = 214)
Knowledgeable about their company and products	C ⁺	C ⁺	C
Knowledgeable about my industry	F	F	F
Knowledgeable about my specific business	F	F	F
Can relate to my role and responsibilities in the organization	F	F	F
Understands my issues and where they can help	F	F	F
Prepared for the questions that I ask	F	F	F
Has relevant examples or case studies to share with me	F	F	F
COMMENTS: <i>Salesperson shows proficiency in products classwork. Please focus on other areas.</i>			
Base: executive-level buyers at global companies with 100 or more employees Source: Q4 2012 Global Executive Buyer Insight Online Survey			

Figure 3 How Equipped Are Sellers For Conversations With Executive Buyers? By Altitude

SALES PREPARATION REPORT CARD				
GRADE SCALE: % of executives who responded sellers are usually prepared in the following ways. A = 90%-100% D = 60%-69% B = 80%-89% F = <60% C = 70%-79%	GRADES			
	C-level (N = 93)	Vice president (N = 72)	Director (N = 150)	Manager (N = 103)
Knowledgeable about their company and products	D ⁺	B ⁻	B ⁻	C
Knowledgeable about my industry	D ⁻	F	D ⁻	F
Knowledgeable about my specific business	F	F	F	F
Can relate to my role and responsibilities in the organization	F	F	F	F
Understands my issues and where they can help	F	F	F	F
Prepared for the questions that I ask	D ⁻	F	F	F
Has relevant examples or case studies to share with me	F	F	F	F
COMMENTS: <i>Salesperson shows proficiency in products classwork. Please focus on other areas.</i>				
Base: executive-level buyers at global companies with 100 or more employees Source: Q4 2012 Global Executive Buyer Insight Online Survey				

Figure 4 How Equipped Are Sellers For Conversations With Executive Buyers? By Geography

SALES PREPARATION REPORT CARD				
GRADE SCALE: % of executives who responded sellers are usually prepared in the following ways. A = 90%-100% D = 60%-69% B = 80%-89% F = <60% C = 70%-79%	GRADES			
	North America (N = 115)	France (N = 42)	Germany (N = 42)	India (N = 42)
Knowledgeable about their company and products	B⁻	B⁺	D⁻	D
Knowledgeable about my industry	F	F	D⁺	F
Knowledgeable about my specific business	F	F	F	F
Can relate to my role and responsibilities in the organization	F	F	F	F
Understands my issues and where they can help	F	F	F	D⁻
Prepared for the questions that I ask	F	F	F	F
Has relevant examples or case studies to share with me	F	F	F	F
COMMENTS: <i>Salesperson shows proficiency in products classwork. Please focus on other areas.</i>				
Base: executive-level buyers at global companies with 100 or more employees Source: Q4 2012 Global Executive Buyer Insight Online Survey				

Figure 4 How Equipped Are Sellers For Conversations With Executive Buyers? By Geography (Cont.)

SALES PREPARATION REPORT CARD				
GRADE SCALE: % of executives who responded sellers are usually prepared in the following ways. A = 90%-100% D = 60%-69% B = 80%-89% F = <60% C = 70%-79%	GRADES			
	UK (N = 42)	China (N = 50)	Brazil (N = 43)	Russia (N = 42)
Knowledgeable about their company and products	A ⁻	B	D	C ⁺
Knowledgeable about my industry	F	C ⁺	C ⁻	F
Knowledgeable about my specific business	F	D ⁺	F	F
Can relate to my role and responsibilities in the organization	F	D ⁻	F	F
Understands my issues and where they can help	F	C	F	F
Prepared for the questions that I ask	F	C ⁻	C ⁻	C
Has relevant examples or case studies to share with me	F	C	F	F
COMMENTS: <i>Salesperson shows proficiency in products classwork. Please focus on other areas.</i>				
Base: executive-level buyers at global companies with 100 or more employees Source: Q4 2012 Global Executive Buyer Insight Online Survey				

IMPLICATIONS

Executives define a valuable interaction with sellers as “the salesperson clearly shows they understand my business issues and can clearly articulate to me how to solve them.”³ Clearly, there is a major gap between that expectation and how infrequently executives perceive that is happening in the sales meetings they take.⁴

Considering that executives focus on solving problems, most of the agenda for a meeting with them should be about those executive buyers, their companies, their roles, and their challenges — but executives perceive that sellers’ agendas in 80% of their sales interactions are about what the vendor wants to talk about.⁵

To start changing this inside-out paradigm, we need to examine how companies are preparing their salespeople. When we audit sales training and onboarding programs, the overwhelming majority of the content salespeople are trained on is product focused, so it’s little wonder that their conversations are also product focused. This explains the source of a huge gap.

To gain and maintain access to executive-level wallet owners, vendors must evaluate their overall value communications strategy.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Methodology

Forrester fielded its Q4 2012 Global Executive Buyer Insight Online Survey to 418 senior-level executives from nine countries who are involved in purchasing technology products or services who work in companies with at least 100 employees. Our sample consisted of 51% buyers who worked on the business side (43% C- or VP-level) and 49% in an IT role (36% C- or VP-level). The panel consists of volunteers who join on the basis of interest and familiarity buying products and services from technology vendors. For quality assurance, panelists are required to provide contact information and answer basic questions about their firms’ revenue and budgets.

All respondents were screened for significant involvement in IT decision-making as well as IT purchasing processes and authorization. This survey was fielded online from November to December 2012 by Research Now on behalf of Forrester and motivated respondents with a small monetary incentive.

Panels are not guaranteed to be representative of the population. Unless otherwise noted, statistical data is intended to be used for descriptive and not inferential purposes.

ENDNOTES

¹ Roles under IT decision-makers include: IT infrastructure and operations, information and knowledge management, application development and/or program management, sourcing and vendor management, enterprise architecture, chief information officer, business processes and/or packaged applications, and security or risk management.

Departments under business decision-makers include: marketing, finance/accounting/legal, engineering, sales, human resources, corporate/executive management, risk management, and line of business head.

² For example, according to one travel site, visitors to Asia are warned, “Although in the West we tend to appreciate people who are “brutally honest” or who get to the point quickly, the opposite holds true in Asia.” Source: Greg Rodgers, “Saving Face and Losing Face,” About.com Asia Travel, (<http://goasia.about.com/od/Customs-and-Traditions/a/Saving-Face.htm>).

³ Regardless of department, altitude level, or geography, this is the No. 1 attribute of a value conversation for executive buyers. See the November 22, 2013, “[What Do Executive Buyers Find Valuable?](#)” report.

⁴ Overall, fewer than two in five executive buyers say that the meetings they have with vendor salespeople are “usually” valuable and live up to expectations. See the August 1, 2013, “[Executive Buyer Expectations — The Bar Is Low](#)” report.

⁵ Regardless of business or IT role, altitude level, or geography executive buyers believe the overwhelming majority of sales interactions are biased to be about the seller’s goals (80%) — *not* the buyers goals (20%). See the August 13, 2013, “[What’s On A Seller’s Agenda?](#)” report.

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