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FINDING AN INTERNAL ADVOCATE

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Quick Summary: Ask for help, not the order.

Abstract:

Your goal for the first sales meeting with a prospect is to get them to agree to a second meeting, where your real selling efforts can begin. If the prospect does not seem likely to agree to a second meeting, ask them to assign someone to help you better understand their needs. Hopefully, an internal person will be assigned to work with you and help you identify what you need to do to move forward.

All of your marketing efforts have paid off. You have finally convinced a major prospect to meet with you thanks to the efforts of the Business Development Analyst that you met at a trade show. He has invited four key people within their organization to attend your presentation. You have carefully crafted your 20-minute PowerPoint presentation, focusing on what you think they want to hear (instead of what you want to say). Your only goal for this introductory meeting is to get the prospects to agree to have a second meeting. In that meeting, you plan to go into detail on how you solve a well-known problem they are (presumptuously) having so they recognize the value in your solution.

The meeting seemed to go well, except the audience's body language didn't seem right. Something was missing. Their questions were good, and they seemed interested. But your key message did not seem to resonate with them as you had hoped. So, instead of asking to have a second meeting, you changed strategy. You said: "I know I made a lot of assumptions about your business and the issues that I address. Is there someone in your organization that I can meet with to get a better understanding of your business and the applicability of my solution?"

This strategy is based on Sun Tzu's advice to hire local guides. In this case, the local guide is an employee who obviously has more access to people and information than you did, or ever will. They are embedded for forty hours a week while you, if you are lucky, will have 30 minutes or so, perhaps, every few weeks. Think about the aftermath of your presentation. Each participant will leave the room and get back to their normal activities. While your meeting was very important to you, it may have been viewed as just another activity in each person's hectic normal activities. However, for the person assigned to follow up with you, someone has tasked them with adding involvement with you to their current activities. They do not have the luxury of forgetting and moving on.

Advantages in this approach are:

1. If no one in the meeting acts on your request to identify someone for you to follow up with, there is a good chance that what you offered and what they need were not a good fit based on their brief exposure.
2. If someone does identify someone, they are likely to be the more senior person in the meeting or the person who represents the element with the problem. In any case, they may be a decision maker or at least have enough interest to have someone explore your proposed opportunity.
3. The assigned person, your new local guide, will feel obligated to explore your opportunity further, allowing you to listen as well as talk.
4. You are likely to get candid feedback from your guide – good or bad. If it's bad, it can save you time and resources in pursuing this prospect rather than wasting effort. If good, it may be the beginning of a relationship in which they can become your internal advocate.

As an internal advocate or even just as an internal contact, they are:

5. Likely to comment on the relative importance the company places on addressing the issue you have raised and its position relative to other issues.
6. Explain the qualification, budgeting, and procurement process you will face.
7. Identify the current methods used to address the problem or issue and how deeply embedded it is in the company's business.
8. With care on your part, they may provide insight into "who will win" and "who will lose" if the company moves forward with your offering. Always remember that in every organization, far more people are empowered to say "no" than those who are empowered to say "yes."
9. They can help you determine the "power of incumbency" – the effort that it will take for the company (really individuals) to adopt your solution versus what they are doing, or not doing, today.
10. They can suggest next steps to help you move forward, including who to talk to, when to talk to them, and, hopefully, what their hot buttons are that you need to address.
11. Finally, if your contact or champion is not "sold" on what you are offering, listen to them and back away. They are not likely to support you if they feel that it is a losing cause or there is a high likelihood of you not being successful.
12. Even if they say no or discourage you from moving forward, be sure to ask them why and avoid responding with the classic "yes, but…" the common response of trying to overcome their objections. The last thing you want is their capitulation, leading you into what they believe is a losing effort and wasting your most precious resource: your time.

The strategy described above directly contrasts with the two common recommendations you hear from consultants, experts, and authors whose primary source of revenue is advocating these ideas, not their outcomes.

1. "ABC" – "Always be Selling" and its next associated recommendation of "Always be asking for the order." The problem with this approach is that when you ask this question, if you have not

sufficiently “set the hook,” the answer will probably be no. Once someone says no, you have to work very hard, if you even have the opportunity, to convince them they are wrong and rethink their decisions. Only ask for the order when you feel the timing is right for them, not you.

2. “Top-Down Selling” The theory is that convincing the key decision maker is the first step, and once they are convinced, their organization will fall in line based on their “order.” Anyone who has run an organization understands that they must rely on their subordinates to complete the tasks associated with running the business. It may work in the military but in private business, employees will not blindly follow a leader’s demands unless them are convinced it is in their and the company’s best interest. “Because the boss said so” is rarely a strong enough reason that results in long-term success. Instead, win over the troops so that when you approach the “general,” others will readily fall in line.

Going back to the beginning of this article and even before that first meeting, consider the various outcome scenarios based on two opposite questions: What if they say yes, and what if they say no? Have a game plan for each.