

Calling on the CEO - Executive Relationship Marketing

The section below is a document that is written to help with the process of calling CEO's and getting in the door. It is not a simple task and can test one's selling skills.

HOW TO TALK WITH THE CEO!!!

Calling on the President and/or CEO of accounts is not as difficult as one might think. Our past negative experiences striving to get on their calendars ranges from letters, voice mails, e-mails, faxes and confrontational experiences with executive Assistants that brings no closer to the President than the Titanic was to land. Why do we have sparse success when trying to meet with the President or CEO? Is it a mission impossible? Hardly. The key to making an appointment with the President is viewing it as an adventure. There are events that need to take place before you can sit down with the leader of a company.

Every person has there own personality and style. The following information is to be digested as merely pragmatic suggestions that have worked consistently for Account Representatives when contacting over 500 companies over the past 30 months. If the information is useful take it. If it's not leave it.

Enjoy the adventure!!!

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES:

- Realizing our call anxiety is a positive factor. 84% of all marketing and salespeople have call reluctance.
- Procrastination is the number one indication that a problem is developing. The sooner contact is made with a prospective CEO or his/her Executive Assistant the less likely you will revert back to only calling at the I/S level.
- Tailor the call for the prospect's benefit. Show value for their personal gain.
- One of the primary causes of phone fear is failing to set an objective for the call. Have a clear-cut picture in your mind of why you are calling and possible directions the call might take.
- After introductions make a benefit statement to the Administrative Assistant. "EA, [My company] wants to provide XYZ Corporation with greater access to certain resources."
- Count on being turned down and made uncomfortable by a CEO's EA. That is just part of this process. It is our job to develop rapport with the EA and show significant value to overcome their rejection. EA's side job is to act as a gate keeper and they will work hard at it. You have lots of gate keys in you experience, use your experience to figure out which key opens the gate.
- Schedule time on your calendars to call your CEO nominated prospects just as you would schedule a meeting or conference call. If it is not on your calendar it usually slips through the cracks.
- To build rapport with an EA or CEO remember:
 1. Thank them for taking time to talk!
 2. Speak with respectful inflections and tones, ingratiate yourself to an EA. The EA is the "gatekeeper" and can be your avenue to success or your instrument of destruction.
 3. Use open ended questions that ask which, what, when, where and how. Strategically worded questions can open the door to vast amounts of useful information.
 4. Key on his/her responses. Include their thoughts in your questions and responses. They will "invest" more time with you.

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- When making a phone call or face to face call with the CEO of a company the focus of conversation must be changed from the technology traditional conversation. It is natural for High Tech soldiers to have a very tactical dialogue focused on platforms, software, architecture, PC's, blaa, blaa, blaa, blaa. The top reason a CEO will not want to talk to a technology provider is that he/she thinks they are going to drug through a painful discussion about High Tech products that they are not even remotely interested in. CEO's love to talk about STRATEGY. That is what is most important to him/her. If you can remember not to go into a 5 minute opera on why your company is so wonderful but rather stay in focus on what the CEO's responsibilities are for that company. If he/she says "I deal strictly with product development" try not to ask them how they use technology, blaa, blaa, blaa, but ask them "what areas are most important to them in product development." Then ask "how involved do you get in product development." The key is to clarify in detail the CEO's priorities. And then you will have enough information to begin an relationship.
- When talking with a CEO focus on what the real problems/pains are. Try to help the CEO drill down to the root cause of problems; find out what, at the core is consuming all the attention of the CEO. For example if you have influenza (get your flu shots) the root cause of the problem is not fever, chills, headache, etc. these are symptoms. The root cause is the **VIRUS** and not the symptoms.
- Find out quickly how the CEO or Assistant perceives you and your company. Do they look at your company like they do every other technology/solution provider? Have they had a horrible out of the blue experience with your company in the past? A positive experience? Do they envision you as being a Sales Guy, Sales Rep, Sales Exec, Client Rep, Client Exec, or a Resource? You want to come off as a Resource!
- Through research, develop an understanding of the prospect's business. Make sure you pay special attention the prospect's business objectives. Research can be performed for you or you can perform research for yourself over the Internet. Be sure to have the research in front of you when making the call. If the prospect has a WEB presence, have the prospect's business WEB page open on your computer.
- Use only 1% of your total knowledge when trying to talk to CEO's, use 100% of questioning techniques and listen carefully understanding what he says. The quality and clarity of questions will have a direct affect on the answers that you get. The person who asks questions is in control of a discussion by allowing others to freely give answers. If you feel uncomfortable with the Executive Assistant or the CEO then ask a quality question. This will take the **heat** off you. Always let the CEO or EA complete their sentences and thoughts.
- Focus on the Executive Assistants, they are the ones who have the formula for you to get on the calendar of the CEO. In many cases the Assistants manage the CEO's calendar. Try not to talk as if they are not the most important person in the company. It doesn't hurt to make them feel as if they are the most important person in the company. If you can get their opinion on how to approach the senior executives you will be more effective.
- If the Assistant is trying to make you be more specific about the reason for calling do not fall into the trap. You really don't know the VALUE you can provide the company until you find out what is IMPORTANT to the CEO. If the Assistant persists for specifics, tell him/her that you will prepare a fax or e-mail of topics and send it to him/her to review because you would like her feedback on whether it is clear and valid enough for a meeting with the CEO. The key here is to use the Assistant's knowledge about the company and the CEO. You will discover tremendous leverage with the Assistants feedback.
- You may ask the question, "Should I try to get in front of the CEO, face to face or should I try to talk on the phone with him/her?" Great question. If you are working with the Assistant your goal might be to get face to face since that is the logical next step. If you are getting pushed back on face to

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face time then it may be a smart move to ask for 5 minutes on the phone with the CEO to explain your intentions. If the EA sends you right through, being prepared can save you a lot of blushing, sweating and wasted time.

- If you do get the CEO on the phone or in person you are at the point of no return. It is at this moment that you can solidify your presence and relationship with a senior executive. The conversation with the leader of the company should **NOT** have anything to do with technology. Technology is a “four letter” word when talking to the Chief. He/she will send you to the CIO or I/S person if he/she feels the issues for discussion are not focused on “the business drivers (profit, revenue growth, reducing inventory, increasing inventory turns, lowering operating costs, lowering cost of sales, increasing return on assets, increasing return on investment, etc.)”
- When the CEO asks you “what can you do to help my business”, he has fallen into your trap. The natural response might be that “Your company is a 1 trillion dollar company with 6 zillion employees that can sell you 1 million different products and services.” This can result in sudden death, not your goal! It is not how many facts about your company can be regurgitated to the CEO; rather, it is how you find out what is most important to him/her. A more appropriate response might be “before I answer your question Mr. CEO, may I ask you what is it that is most important to you in today. What keeps you awake at night! What is it that you see is the most important problems that you need to solved.” The call to the CEO is not about your company, it's about what is most important to the CEO. If you can find this out, the call will be of value to the CEO and to you.
- Express to the President, CEO or Executive Assistant or any other contact in the executive offices that your call does **NOT** have anything to do with computers, hardware or software. Convey the thought that your company is focusing on partnering with key executives in select companies to discuss their business problems **not** technology issues.
- Northwestern University surveyed executives in 300 corporations and found that executives found value from solution providers in 3 areas:
 1. The person calling them (type of personality, title, presentation) --- Non-commodity selling is about people selling to people.
 2. The offer (why is the contact calling...to find out what is important to the Executive)
 3. Frequency of contact being **more** important the medium (face, phone, e-mail, pigeons)
- Have an offer:
 1. Letter (includes introduction & value statement from rep)
 2. Memento (hand cut and hand polished with a lathe; the lettering is lasered)
 3. Ms. President “[My company] would like a closer relationship with you...”
 4. Ms. President “your company was selected from others in the Geography to pursue a partnership.”
- **Internet** research before calling the company is a necessity (Presidents and/or CEOs can tell in a “New York second” if you don’t know background on the company).
- Have a “call sheet” that records contact information you have with the account. On this sheet track information about the Assistants and President put dates, times, names, doctor appointments, birthdays, vacations, sick days, travel information etc. (this gives you information to use for conversation topics).
- Talk with enthusiasm when on the phone. A monotone voice will get a monotone response.

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- To reach the President or CEO, it is **imperative** that you make first contact with the executive's Assistant. You will be "shot down" quickly if you look past the Assistant. Treat the Assistant as if he/she is the President.
- **NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER** leave a voice mail with a CEO or Assistant unless they call you first and you need to let them know that you are trying to call them back. They receive hundreds of calls a day. If you put an expectation on them to call you back and they do not, you have given them an easy way to say **NOT INTERESTED**. You will "not" stand out among other solution providers if you leave a voice mail. Keep calling until you get the Assistant and/or CEO. This is why a "call sheet" is important. You can review your call activity and identify a window of opportunity to reach the Assistant or CEO (hint: ask the operator to page the Assistant or put you through to someone who sits by the Assistant so you can find out where he/she is hiding).
- If the CEO travels, find out when he will be in town and let the Assistant know you are available ("Pat, will Mr. Smith be in town this week?) Give the Assistant a time you can talk on the phone or meet and see what kind of response you get. If you are turned down say "well, next time I am available, I will give you a call." Wait a few days and call back. It is better not to appear anxious or aggressive when talking with the Assistant. Keep in mind you have something that will benefit their company ("Pat, this is an excellent opportunity for Mr. Smith and his company or I would not waste your time, what is the best way for me to talk with Mr. Smith").
- If you feel it is not possible to get face to face with the CEO right away then ask for a five minute phone meeting with the President. This 5 minute phone meeting could turn into a 40 minute phone call if you have researched the company well enough and know the industry drivers. Use lines like, "Pat, I know Mr. Gerstner's schedule is tight, is there a window of 5 minutes early in the morning or between meetings to speak with him on the phone? The conversation need not last more than a few minutes, I want to let him know how we can start a partnership and what some of the businesses in your industry are doing." Sometimes you can get a face to face call before the phone call. Usually, though, the phone call request is used when it is clear you are not going to get face to face in the near future.
- Focus on **developing a relationship of trust and value** between you, the President and his/her Assistant. The purpose of your phone call to the President is to explore a strategic relationship between their company and your company and share valuable information (such as hot topics in the industry, Management Consulting, supply chain, eBusiness, ERP, CRM, eProcurement, increase profit, growing market share, executing strategies, leverage the Internet/Intranet/Extranet, improve customer satisfaction, defeating competition, becoming customer centric or whatever you can put together after extensive research on the Internet). **ALL OF THESE ISSUES SHOULD ONLY BE DISCUSSED AFTER YOU IDENTIFY WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO THE CEO OR PRESIDENT**
- Try not to give the Assistant too much information to make their own judgements. He or she will refer you to someone else in the company. One of the Assistant's responsibilities is to find out what you want and refer you to someone else in the company. Always keep in mind, the Executive Assistant has the power to put you on the CEO's calendar. The Assistant has to power to make an opening for you. It is essential that you realize and respect this power. Say, "Pat, in the companies [your company] has chosen to contact, we like to explore critical issues with the President to see if she/he wants to **partner** with us. Sometimes Pat, the President is extremely interested other times he/she is not. **PAT, WILL YOU HELP ME FIND THE BEST WAY TO GET ON MR. GERSTNER'S CALENDAR? A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN OUR COMPANIES CAN RESULT IN A SUCCESS FOR ALL OF US.**"
- Emphasize that your focus is not information technology. If the Assistant or President detects information systems in your blood, you will be sent to a place far, far away from the executive offices, a place called Information Services JAIL.

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- Ask for no more than a fifteen minute face to face meeting once you have a chance to discuss scheduling a meeting. When you are viewed as a “time bandit” you will be less likely to get the meeting. If the President sees value in the first fifteen minutes you will find yourself there an hour or more.
- Develop a value statement for the company before calling them. Why should the CEO talk to you? Value statements should include customers, markets, products, services, competitors, business economics (cost pressures, margin pressures, human resources). What value can you and your company bring the company? This is difficult to develop without first talking with the client but there is a wealth of information available on the Internet (Financials, Journals, Home pages of the client etc.) Example: “Mr. President, you released 250 products in 1998 and 400 in the previous two years. According to the annual report these products presently account for only 15% of revenues. You are turning out a lot of products. Do you have visibility on the effectiveness of your investment in all these new products?”
- Use the person’s name on the phone and in person as much as you can. A person’s name (spoken) is the most motivating word in the English language.
- Humor is an effective tool when talking to the Assistant about the \$2 memento piece (“Pat, I hope you didn’t pry the plaque apart and take the \$2 bill..ha ha ha. Pat, I hope no one dropped the paper weight on their foot..ha ha ha. Pat, We were going to put \$100 bill in the Lucite block but we figured that Mr. Smith would smash the piece and take the money..ha ha ha)” If this is not your style to joke around then don’t. After expressing humor make sure you let the Assistant and the President know that the \$2 Thomas Jefferson memento is hand carved and polished with a lathe. The lettering on this attractive piece is done with a laser. **AND THE MESSAGE WE ARE SENDING WITH THE MEMENTO IS THAT WE WOULD LIKE TO EXPLORE A BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP, A PARTNERSHIP.**
- Try to use open ended questions such as what, where, when, why and how while addressing the President or Assistant. “What is important to you right now?” “Where are most of your problems in the Supply Chain?” “When do you do most of your business planning (develop strategic initiatives) with your senior executives?” “Why has your company revenues grown X% and the industry average is less than 1/2X%? How do you solve cross functional inconsistencies with design engineers, procurement, marketing and distribution? What are the three things in your company that are giving keeping you awake at night.
- Smile when talking on the phone.
- Let the client do the talking and listen closely. If the President or Assistant stops talking, rather than jump in and start to talk, remain silent until he/she starts talking again. Self critique each call when your finished. Ask yourself, "How could I have been more effective?" Try not to talk more than 30% of the time when addressing the President.
- Presidents are persuaded as much by conviction as they are by logic.
- Company Presidents and their Assistants are people too. They are no different than you and are motivated by their own self-interest.
- You must constantly show appreciation for the AA’s time on the phone.
- End the call with respect for his/her time. “Thank you for your time.”

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- If you sense the Assistant or President is busy (he/she has calls holding, preparing for a meeting, have people waiting, etc.), **insist** on calling back at a more convenient time ("Pat, you are swamped, can I call you back another time? When?"). If their mind is preoccupied they will not be giving your unfair share of their attention.
- Key on the client's responses. Respond to what they say rather than what you plan to say. For example, Mr. Smith says, "I cannot get effective communication working between management and my sales force!" Respond with, "Mr. Smith, you are not the only one trying to communicate more effectively with the sales force. Sun, HP, Oracle and Microsoft are experiencing the same thing. How have you tried to solve the problem?"
- Send a brief thank you e-mail or letter to the Assistant or President after you have spoken to him/her on the phone or following an in person meeting. This shows respect and concern for his/her time as well as giving you a chance to summarize the conversation.
- Call the prospect within a week of the \$2 memento and cover letter mailing. But don't be dejected if it takes you 3 or 4 tries to get the Assistant and another few calls to get to the President. The key to talking to the top is patience and persistence (a trite and overused phrase, but true).
- Being aggressive with the Assistant usually yields very little. Persistence with politeness achieves more. Contact with the Assistant (but not leaving voice mail) should not appear hurried, frustrating or aristocratic. Speak slowly and use few words. In the case of rapport building, using the spoken word less can mean a lot more.
- Closed ended questions allows the Assistant and CEO to say **NO**. If you give them a chance to say yes or no only immediately, you will not be able gather information critical for relationship building conversation. Avoid: "Do you use the Internet?" "Have you used consultants before?" "Are you getting the information you need from operations to make sound decisions?" Try: "What do you think of the Internet?", "How do you feel consultants can best help your company?", "Where do you get most of your information to make your strategic decisions?", **"What area of the business are you most involved?"**
- Try not to talk technology with the Assistant or President. Use business vocabulary not information virtual verbiage (No Tech Speak). Position the conversation for the CEO not the CIO. Express that the areas you want to explore are business and industry issues.
- Avoid assuming the Assistant or President understands [your company] organizational structure. Explain your go to market strategy and let them know your company is in the business of **SOLVING BUSINESS PROBLEMS and DELIVERING SOLUTIONS**.
- Focus on forming a closer relationship with the CEO. This can be done by being interested in his/her strategic priorities, problems and vision. Try to develop relevant and interesting conversation ("Mr. Smith, I am impressed at your accomplishments over the last 5 years. I know a company who released 200 new products in 1999 without a clue of the ROI. Do you track the ROI on all your products?") Communicate partnership, partnership, partnership ("Our Northern California team has expertise in e-business, they may be a good "fit" for a strategic partnership with your company").
- Once you WIN a face to face meeting, do not to take stacks of brochures or handouts into meetings with CEO's. Take at most one "leave behind" as a reminder of the meeting. After you meet with them you can have an excuse for another interaction by mailing such items. This gives you a reason to have another conversation.

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- Plan for your meeting using multiple resources if possible to assist. Select the attendees with caution, do not inundate the CEO with your companies bodies creating a haze in his mind. Only bring people who add value and leave the rest behind.

These are principles that have proven to work in most executive environments. But each person's communication style is widely distinct; yet, it is my experience aligning our unique personalities with some of these tips elevates our performance.