

WHERE TO BEGIN

In selling to big corporations, knowing where to make the first presentation can make all the difference

BY I. MARTIN JACKNIS

Most salespeople I know go into large corporations at the wrong level. They spend six months selling by the book, and just when they expect to close—boom. Someone they've never heard of before calls the deal off, and they have nothing to show for a lot of hard work except feelings of rejection and a sense of time wasted. It's no secret that the first move on a sale is critical. The question is, where to begin?

Over the years I have developed a selling strategy that answers that question. It comes out of understanding three points about large corporations. The first is what people at different corporate levels are

knows that you have to deal with several buyers, all of whom will have a say in the decision. What many salespeople don't realize, however, is that each of these buyers is looking at your product from a somewhat different perspective.

In their book *Strategic Selling*, Robert Miller and Stephen Heiman identify four buying influences in large organizations, and their categories are a useful way to identify the various perspectives. The authors name the economic buyer, who concentrates on strategic issues; the user buyer, who is more interested in tactical matters; and the technical buyer, who, obviously, will concentrate on the tech-

identify the other players and know how to approach them.

The first person you'll want to identify is the economic buyer. He has the final word on whether the company will buy your high-ticket product or service. Often this is the president or the head of a large unit or department, who rarely gets involved with the details of the sale. What does concern the economic buyer are big-picture issues, such as how reliable you are and what the bottom-line impact of your product will be. His perspective is largely strategic, although he may also worry about some tactical and operational issues. For the most part, though, the economic buyer is concerned with what businesses the company should be in, what products to market, and what trends to watch. When you're dealing with the economic buyer, it makes sense to tailor your proposal so that it highlights all of your product's strategic advantages.

Next in line is the user buyer, the person who will actually use, or supervise the use of, your product. Typically, this is a vice-president who is responsible for making sure that you're offering a better deal than your competitors and that your product is the right one for the company. Like the economic buyer, the user buyer is interested in strategic issues but is even more interested in tactical issues. He concentrates on figuring out the best ways to reach company objectives. When you're selling to the user buyer, you'll want to concentrate on why your product is the best possible answer to whatever problem the company is trying to solve.

Often working under the user buyer is the technical buyer, who makes sure your product meets all technical specifications and company requirements. This person might be an MIS director, an engineer, a systems analyst, a purchasing agent—even a lawyer. Though the actual decision-making powers of the technical buyer are limited, he will probably make you jump over the most hurdles. When you get to the technical buyer you'll need to emphasize the specific aspects of your product—warranties, tolerances, and so on. Though somewhat concerned with tactical issues, he is more concerned with operational questions: how much does the product cost? How does it function? Does it align with existing company systems?

If your technical buyer is an MIS director, for example, you won't score many points by pushing the claim that your product can double the company's profit margin. That's a strategic issue of more interest to the economic buyer. And the user buyer would much rather hear about cost-benefit ratios than technical details.

Once you've figured out the cast of characters and the approach you'll take—emphasizing the strategic advantages of your product to the economic buyer, for example; the tactical to the user buyer; and so on, how do you decide where to start? To make the best choice, you need to understand where power lies in large corporations and how individuals set their priorities.

Most salespeople I know feel most comfortable with the user buyer, often a vice-president, and that's where the initial call typically is made. Let's say you or your sales team are typical, and that you decide to open the door by going first to the vice-president of a *Fortune* 1,000 company. And let's assume you've geared your product presentation to the tactical and strategic implications for his company. The vice-president is very impressed. In fact, he is so impressed that he says he's personally going to run with the proposition. You might think that'll put your company's proposal high on his to-do list, or, even better, that he'll take it to his boss. But let me tell you the more likely action.

The top half of the vice-president's priority list is usually dominated by projects that have been delegated by his boss, the president. So when the vice-president says he's going to "run with your proposition," he means that on a list of 10 items, he's going to make it number 6. That's a pretty sobering thought. If he found your presentation less than wonderful, it's even more sobering. He'll send it to his assistant, the technical person under him. Granted, it'll be at the top of the assistant's priority list, but it will also be two steps away from the president, who makes final purchase decisions for high-priced items.

Now let me take you through another approach, the one I've come to use. My rule of thumb is, always go one level higher than the person you're trying to influence. So, instead of targeting the user buyer, I go straight to the economic buyer. Suppose, in the above example, you first approach the president, emphasizing strategic and tactical uses of your product. If he finds your proposition worthwhile, you'll end up high on his priority list, and

there's obviously nothing wrong with that. But if the president has some doubts, though he's basically intrigued by your product, he may send you off to the vice-president. In that case, you'll be high on the vice-president's list of objectives, and your proposition will be evaluated speedily and from the right perspective—strategic and tactical—which will increase its

HOW TO APPROACH LARGE-COMPANY BUYERS

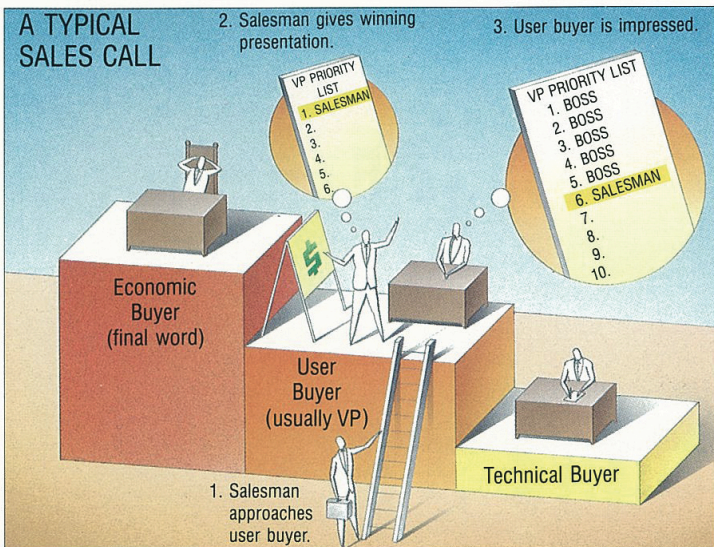
Buyer	Wants to hear about (in ranking order)
President (economic buyer)	1. Strategic advantages of your product 2. Tactical advantages 3. Operational advantages
Vice-president (user buyer)	1. Tactical advantages of your product 2. Strategic advantages 3. Operational advantages
Technical director (technical buyer)	1. Operational advantages of your product 2. Tactical advantages 3. Strategic advantages

probability of being understood and accepted. What's more, you end up higher on the vice-president's list than if you had wowed him in the first place—and ended up number six.

This selling strategy isn't foolproof. There'll be times when the president or vice-president turns your proposition down. But chances are they also would have turned it down if it had taken months to wind its way upward through the hierarchy, so you're still better off. You've saved time and money. And there's not an experienced salesperson around who doesn't know that packing your bag and leaving early is sometimes the best possible strategy you can take.

This approach to selling means that you'll be dealing with presidents a good deal of the time, at least on your initial forays into a company. And that can be very intimidating at first. But remember, if you can win that person over, the rest of the crew usually will follow suit. When it comes to selling complex products, it takes a lot more time to move up than to move down the corporate hierarchy. □

Marty Jacknis
Opportunity Maximizers, Inc.
OpportunityMaximizers.com
Marty@OpportunityMaximizers.com
492 Regatta Bay Blvd., Destin, FL
516-816-4464
Professional Speaking, Coaching,
Facilitation & Training



looking for in your product. The second is how individuals in large corporations set their priorities. And the third is how power is distributed. If you understand these three points, you'll know where to make that decisive first presentation, and I can almost guarantee that your selling cycle will be shorter and less costly, your proposal will be considered more seriously, and your deal will proceed with fewer surprises. The strategy is particularly effective if you have a complex product or service to sell.

Anybody who's tried to sell such high-ticket products to a large corporation

nical aspects of your product or service.

In Miller and Heiman's scheme of things, there is also a coach. This is someone who has a vested interest in your making the sale and acts as your advocate within the company. He or she may be a relative or friend, someone who had a positive experience with you in the past, or someone who simply trusts you and believes your product is good for the company. If you don't already have a coach in the organization you want to sell to, it's a good idea to develop one if at all possible. Not only will you have a strong ally, but the coach makes it much easier for you to