

# Selling to Executives: How to Stop Losing and Keep Winning!

Stephen J. Bistriz, Ed.D.  
[steveb@sellxl.com](mailto:steveb@sellxl.com)

Karen L. Jackson  
[cchangework@msn.com](mailto:cchangework@msn.com)



One thing that great business-to-business salespeople do on a consistent basis is focus on the *right* deals. They seem to have a built-in GPS system that enables them to accurately and effectively assess their current sales opportunities. They don't waste their time chasing every deal that's placed in front of them. It's like they have a sixth sense about working on just the *right* deals...the deals they have the best chances of winning. They can quickly examine ten deals and determine which ones

should receive their immediate attention and which ones can easily be placed on the back burner. They are masters of qualification.

## Three Compelling Qualification Questions in Any Sales Campaign

There are three compelling questions that should be used throughout each sales campaign to help you qualify your opportunity. Things change, people change, and as a result, you should not just qualify early—but often!

The three compelling questions are:

- ***Should We Pursue This Opportunity?*** Is this project or application (associated with this sales opportunity) connected to a key business initiative and has funding been approved and allocated? Do you understand the client's business drivers, business initiatives and the driving reasons for the client to change or make a decision to implement this project or application...or is the client simply gathering information?

Developing an in-depth understanding of the client's business, their key

customers and competitors is an important aspect of this question.

Since time and resources are limited, it's important to determine that the opportunity being assessed is a real and represents a worthwhile investment in time and resources.

- ***Can We Effectively Compete for this Opportunity?*** Solution fit is but one component of whether you can be competitive in a sales campaign. Are there enough internal or external resources available to compete successfully for the business? Are there existing business relationships established with the client? Does your solution offer specific business value that enables you to differentiate yourself from your competitor(s)?

Knowing how your company, as well as your solution, relates to the specific sales opportunity can be a key ingredient to winning the deal. Being able to realistically contrast that information with that of your competitor(s) is an important factor of assessing this compelling question.

- ***Can We Reasonably Expect to Win this Opportunity?*** This question is the one that is most often overlooked in sales campaigns; however, it is clearly the most important one. Many opportunities are lost even if the salesperson has the best solution, the best delivery and even the best terms and conditions. This question deals with how well the salesperson understands the client's organizational structure that ultimately allows them to identify the inside support necessary to win the deal.

The answer to this compelling question also reveals which key executives wield the most power and influence within the client organization, as it relates to this sales opportunity. Most importantly, the salesperson must determine the *relevant* executive associated with the opportunity – as outlined above – the executive who stands to gain the most or lose the most as a result of the application or project associated with the sales opportunity.

Do the most powerful people in the client's organization want you to win? Do you have credibility with the client's key players? Most importantly, is there political alignment with the key players in the client organization who either affect or are affected by the buying decision? Finally, what facts support these assessments of your client relationships?

Contrasting these factors with that of your competitor(s) can have a significant impact on your decision to continue to pursue a sales opportunity.

These questions, and the underlying criteria, should be asked multiple times during a sales campaign. They should certainly be asked near the beginning of a

campaign to determine if a legitimate sales opportunity exists and should be pursued. They should be asked again if there's a significant change to the client's business profile or to the competitive landscape during a sales campaign. It might also be appropriate to pose the questions again if there is a major change to the profile of the sales organization (i.e., the introduction of new solutions).

Examining each of these three compelling questions at multiple times during a sales campaign can be compared to an airline pilot examining a pre-flight checklist. No matter how many times a pilot has flown a certain plane, s/he meticulously examines that checklist before each and every flight, probing each question, using an exact, non-negotiable approach. S/he clearly doesn't want to be surprised midflight and does not want to leave anything to chance because the stakes are too high.

You have to use the same approach in a sales campaign. You can't leave anything to chance. You have to not only know the information you have, but the information and intelligence you are missing! That can only be accomplished by applying a structured, repeatable methodology that you have internalized and apply consistently.

But, wait, there's more...those same winning salespeople consistently create, maintain and leverage relationships with the most influential executives inside and outside of the client organization. They are able to quickly identify the *relevant* executive for their sales opportunity and focus on developing lasting relationships with that executive. The *relevant* executive can be described as the highest-ranking executive who stands to gain the most or lose the most as a result of the application or project associated with the sales opportunity.

Top performing salespeople clearly demonstrate the proven paradigm that *executives don't buy because they understand, executives buy when they feel understood*. What do they know that most don't?



## Key Reasons for Losing Deals

Recent surveys have indicated that the four key reasons that salespeople lose deals are as follows:

- Lack of relationships at the executive level
- Client is unconvinced of the service provider's level of commitment and/or credentials
- No clear strategies exist to effectively address the executive's risk sensitivity
- Inability to effectively articulate a

compelling value proposition that accelerates the client's goals, objectives or aspirations

You're probably wondering why *price* didn't make the list. Price is not on the list because anyone can be a winner for a day. It's called a discount. Funny thing about offering rock bottom prices, once you hit bottom, there's nowhere else to go. But that won't stop your clients for asking for more. There are very few deals that cut to the bone to win a client that have been able to keep that same client long term. In order to consistently win, you've got to demonstrate value above and beyond the price point.

Now let's review each of those four reasons.

The ***Number One Reason that salespeople lose deals couldn't be more clear – lack of relationships at the executive level.*** How many times in your own career have you had the best solution, the best price, the best terms and conditions and the best delivery and still lost the deal? The key question becomes: Did the most powerful (or influential) executive in the client organization want you to win the deal? If you can't answer that question positively, chances are that the executive was aligned with one of your competitors. If they really wanted *you* to win, they would have done something about it.

Top sales executives know that executive-level relationships take time to cultivate and nurture. You can't walk into an executive's office for the first time and immediately expect to be treated as a trusted advisor. You have to demonstrate a consistent level of integrity and capability in each and every interaction to achieve that level of relationship. That capability can be demonstrated in one of two ways; namely, by creating value directly within the client organization or by using a business reference that can describe how you have created value in their organization.

When your relationship is elevated to the trusted advisor level, it often becomes collaborative to the point where the executive starts to think about what s/he can do for you to continue to further develop the relationship. This is the level of business relationship where the finest professional salespeople continually operate. These are the salespeople that focus on the client's success and view that success as critical to their own success. They continually demonstrate that they can create and deliver business value to the client – and personal value to the client executive.

The ***Second Reason that salespeople lose deals is that the client is not convinced of the service provider's level of commitment and/or credentials.*** To some degree, this is linked to the number one reason salespeople lose. The lack of executive-level relationships in the client organization helps create a degree of uncertainty with respect to the salesperson's level of commitment.

However, by continually focusing on enhancing and developing executive-level relationships, you are in a much better position to also mitigate this objection.

Phenomenal salespeople make certain that they continually communicate the value they create and deliver to the client organization. While this can be viewed as “blowing one’s own horn”, more importantly it provides the executive with an understanding of the value they are contributing to their client’s organization – and perhaps to the client, personally. This is critical! Never assume that an executive understands the extent to which you are creating and delivering value. Often those details get lost after contract signing! Only by communicating the specific business value that you bring to the table, will you start to differentiate how you and your company are different and better than your competitors.

The ***Third Reason that salespeople lose deals is by not having clear strategies to address risk sensitivity.*** Executives operate as managers of risk. Effective executives will take calculated risks to achieve significant results. However, they must be convinced that the risk of change will deliver a significant level of value or potential achievement. Exceptional salespeople are masters of mitigating the risk(s) executives assign to making change.

You must be able to demonstrate to the relevant executive that you alone have the ability to mitigate those risks and deliver more value than any of your competitors. When you are effective in doing this, the executive’s focus on risk shifts dramatically from what could go wrong if they don’t make the change, to how do they make sure they don’t increase their risk by *not* changing.

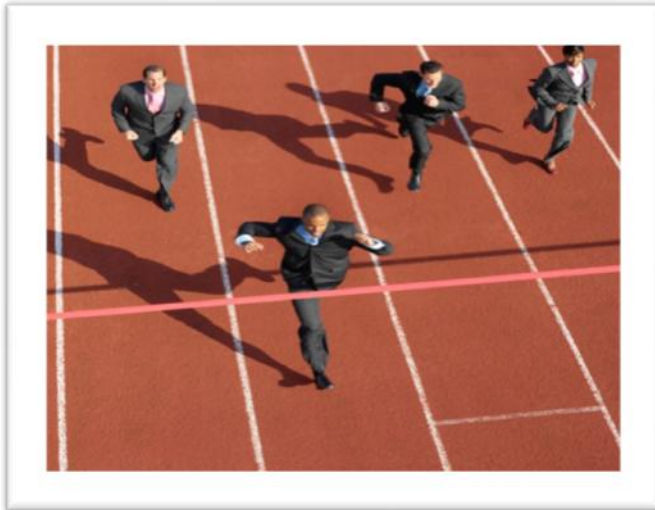
The ***Fourth Reason that salespeople lose deals is that they fail to articulate a compelling value proposition that is focused on achieving the client’s goals, objectives or aspirations.*** In surveying a number of CXO-level client executives, we found that more than 90% of the executives surveyed said they looked for salespeople to deliver compelling value propositions to them. Top salespeople know that it’s not enough to communicate features, functions, speeds and feeds, they have to be able to communicate the difference their product/service will make to an executive’s goals and objectives.

If you, too, are interested in developing winning value propositions that address the client’s key issues, you must make sure they have the following characteristics:

- Enables the client to perceive that your solution offers competitive advantage
- metrics
- Creates a sense of urgency for the client to take immediate action
- Is provocative and compelling

This will prove next to impossible if you don't have a thorough understanding of what drives the client's business, their key metrics and what's most important to them.

## Call to Action



If you want to take your sales to the next level, here are a few things you can do today to make sure you win more deals tomorrow.

- **First, begin to expand those executive-level relationships in the client organization.** Start by identifying the *relevant* executive for the sales opportunity and identify the other key

players of power and influence. Consider focusing only on your top opportunities to see how this approach might be of value to you. This represents a good first step to implementing a consistent, repeatable process for all major sales opportunities.

- **Second, look to learn as much as you can about each client's business, their customers, their competition and their industry so that you can begin to deliver value to each one.** Take the steps necessary to elevate your level of business relationship with some key clients so that you can see the benefits of those efforts.
- **Third, examine the specific ways you can begin to mitigate the risks associated with the solutions you propose to your clients.** Look at how you can demonstrate to the client executive that you alone have the ability to mitigate any risks associated with the implementation of a value-driven solution.
- **Fourth, begin to develop compelling, provocative value propositions that demonstrate the return on investment your solutions can provide to your clients.** Start with a focus on some key deals where you can clearly articulate and differentiate your solution from that of your competitors. Share your value propositions with your sales team and challenge them to provide you with suggestions to improve them.

### **About Steve Bistriz**

Steve Bistriz has more than 40 years of high-tech sales, sales management and training management experience. He is a published author and lecturer in the field of sales, sales management and selling to executives. Steve spent more than 27 years with IBM in sales and training-related positions. He then led the development of sales training programs which were delivered to tens of thousands of salespeople worldwide. He holds a doctorate in human resource development from Vanderbilt University and is currently president of his own sales training and consulting firm, based in Atlanta. Visit his website – [www.sellxl.com](http://www.sellxl.com)

### **About Karen L. Jackson**

Karen Jackson has more than 20 years of experience in business strategy, organizational change and complex sales as an executive with Fortune 500 corporations. Her solutions have been the catalyst for achieving unparalleled results in terms of revenue, profit and competitive advantage. She has analyzed go-to-market strategies spanning several industries. Her work has taken her beyond the U.S. to South Africa, Sweden, Japan, Malaysia, England, France, Belgium, Denmark, Australia, Singapore and Germany. Karen is the Managing Partner of C-ChangeWork LLC, a business strategy consulting firm. Visit her website – [www.c-changework.com](http://www.c-changework.com)