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## Turn a C-level Customer Into Your Most Valuable Reference

by Bill Lee

In any industry, selling to a C-level executive buyer is often a cause for celebration. Senior executive customers tend to have larger budgets, are less price sensitive and more focused on value. But closing the sale is no time to relax. That's when the real work — the real opportunity — begins. C-level buyers are often highly ambitious, eager to learn, enjoy the spotlight, and have wide-ranging peer networks, all of which can open far more business for you. A C-level buyer can be highly lucrative — but a C-level advocate can be many times more so.

So, how do you tap the advocacy potential of an ambitious, well-connected CXO? With an equally powerful advocacy value proposition. Here are some guideposts:

**The starting point: Deliver what you promise and promptly fix what goes wrong.** Obvious, I know, but often overlooked or lost sight of in ongoing sales relationships. These basic actions are what generate genuine enthusiasm from a customer, and without that, you don't have a real reference. You can't create or enlist a customer advocate or build a customer-based sales force without the solid foundation of a consistently responsive relationship.

**Tie advocacy to performance.** Remarkably, some firms try putting an agreement to provide references or other advocacy activities up front in a new C-level customer's contract — a major turnoff. A better, value-based approach is to initiate a quarterly review process that looks more like the following:

1. **First quarter:** review all performance metrics with the customer and continue doing so every three months. Make sure they're being met. If any are not, correct the problems swiftly.

2. Next, identify how your solutions are benefiting the customer and then suggest that you and your customer document it. This can be a powerful win-win that provides customers with verification, a learning tool, and a basis for building best practices, while providing a case study or success story for you.

3. Once trust is well-established (and not before — perhaps by the third quarter) turn to a discussion of colleagues in her network who might be facing similar issues. By now your C-level customer may well be ready to open up her contact lists and talk to prospects on your behalf.

(Notice how providing advocacy evolves naturally for the customer)

**Remember, you have leverage.** If your firm is a smaller supplier or just getting started, your C-level customers want to help you. “Helping my smaller vendors grow and get established is in my interest,” notes Patty Morrison, CIO of Cardinal Health — and the kind of dynamic customer advocate ideal for any technology firm. “So I’m willing to do what I can to help you grow your customer base. On the other hand, if you’re larger and better established, you can help me reward my team by having them showcase their work at conferences and present papers. It’s great career development for them.”

**Provide your customer advocates with opportunities for growth.** Often your most active customer references are eager for personal and professional development. Provide these in the form of speaking opportunities, interviews with the media, and the like, where customers can demonstrate their own success and thought leadership. Audiences (and prospective buyers) will get the message that your firm is an important part of their success.

**Align your PR messaging with your customer’s, wherever possible.** “If you want a customer to speak as a public reference for you,” notes Morrison, “you need to understand the message their own PR team is trying to get out to the world about their company — and then ask, how might your message tie into theirs?” When she was CIO at Motorola, for example, the company had public positions on things like use of mobile devices and public safety. So, if you’re doing

business with Motorola, you should step back and ask how your own products and/or services contribute to public safety in complementary ways.

**Create a customer council.** You can highlight your customer’s thought leadership, and benefit from it, by creating a customer council. For example, Microsoft’s Interoperability Executive Customer Council (IEC) was formed to address the topic of interoperability of technology systems, a major issue for CIOs worldwide. Microsoft had little trouble attracting a superb and exclusive group of CIOs, CTOs and other systems executives from organizations like Aetna, Raytheon, American Express, the European Commission, Government of India, Denmark’s Ministry of Finance and others. They did so simply by selecting an issue that was on everyone’s mind, finding marquee participants who helped attract the rest, and then taking a serious approach to addressing the issue and coming up with solutions. Microsoft demonstrated its seriousness by including council members who aren’t customers, and by including competitors in developing solutions. The resulting value to Microsoft, in terms of building new C-level relationships, enhancing its brand, and developing thought leadership has been immense. And note, such councils are not expensive to run and don’t require you to have a big name — the names that count to prospective council members are the names of their peers who participate.

Remember, a customer — especially at the C-level — who’s taken the risk of putting her eggs in your basket wants you to succeed, for obvious reasons: if yours is a small company, you’re more likely to survive. If you’re a large firm, you’re more likely to invest research and product development dollars improving the solutions you’re providing. This holds true for small, large, or even marquee customers. That good will represents serious value on the table in the form of potential reference and referral support.

But it won’t happen on its own. As outlined above, you’ve got to consciously and consistently find ways to realize that value.