

Coaching Tips *by Miller Heiman, Inc.*

LOSING THROUGH INTIMIDATION

This article references concepts from Miller Heiman's Strategic Selling program.

Every selling opportunity involves an Economic Buyer, the person who has the final say on whether your proposal is a go or a no. Salespeople are more likely to run into a high-level executive than the middle manager that used to be in this role of Economic Buyer. The higher the title, the more likely that a salesperson will feel uncomfortable, even intimidated. In preparing yourself to meet an Economic Buyer, your psychological readiness is just as important as your knowledge of your product or your observance of the common amenities such as making an appointment.

There's only one sure way we've found to overcome feelings of intimidation when you confront a high-level executive. That's to remember that, although the Economic Buyer for your sale might have a three-inch-thick carpet and a four-car garage, he's still a human being and it's to that human being that you're selling.

'If you focus on the differences, social or economic, between you and your Economic Buying Influences, you'll only intensify your feelings of discomfort.'

We don't mean he's "just an ordinary Joe." He's not. In corporate America, people who play the role of Economic Buyer are different, if only because they make more money than the rest of the population. But if you focus on the differences, social or economic, between you and your Economic Buying Influences, you'll only intensify your feelings of discomfort.¹ You want to minimize those feelings. One way to do that is to remember the man or woman behind the glamorous role.

You might think of John Smith in simply functional terms, as the person who puts you in fear and trembling for your career because he has the power to release the funds for your sale. But maybe he's also a doting father, a lousy tennis player, a guy who danced in his socks at his high school reunion, a homeowner who waters his lawn on Saturdays and watches football and orders in Kung Pao Chicken, just like you. Just like you, too, he's got regrets about the past and hopes for the future and needs, both business and personal, that have to be attended to right now.

Here's the most important thing of all to remember: Since you're offering him a proposal, you are in a position to fulfill some of those needs. In order to do that, though, you have to learn whatever you can about him as an individual.

Again, as is so often the case when you're clearing away difficulties that stand in the way of your sales objectives, a reliable Coach (someone in or outside the buying organization who can give you information about the Buying Influence) can be a valuable asset. A good Coach can help you turn those difficulties into opportunities by providing answers to questions about the Economic Buyer's business needs, and about his or her personal interests as well.

Answers to the first type of question will help you identify which corporate Results your product or service can provide to the buying company. Answers to the second type of question will help you determine the Economic Buying Influence's personal Wins. Having your Coach brief you, before you make that first call, on what your Economic Buyer is like as a person is an excellent way of zeroing in on likely Win-Results -- and thus reducing your uneasiness in this key individual's presence.

¹ Also see "Why People Block" under "Building Your Career - Developing As A Manager" in this issue.

BETTER INFORMATION WILL LEAD TO BETTER ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT

Good account strategies aren't set in a vacuum. They are by definition the effective management of information. The better the information, the better the strategy. Therefore, when you're ready to improve account management, it's time to gather account data.

We realize that when you hear the phrase "gather data," your eyes immediately glaze over. You've probably done your share of annual account plans that weigh half as much as the Manhattan phone book. That's not what we're getting at. We at Miller Heiman recognize the uselessness of most account data. We're urging you to put the "More is Better" philosophy in the shredder where it belongs, and concentrate on gathering information you can use.

To help you focus your efforts we propose two guidelines:

- **Look for information that relates to what you sell customers**
- **Look for information regarding trends in customer business**

The first tip is mere common sense -- although you wouldn't know that from the heft of those phonebook account plans. Your planners can tally up the most sophisticated customer -- and industry -- data in the world, but if it doesn't relate to the specific relationship you want to establish with the customer, it's like what the politician once said about his polyglot opponent: "He knows six languages and has nothing to say."

'Look for information that tells you where your customers are going -- and where they think they could be going, given current trends.'

The second tip is less obvious. Look for information that tells you where your customers are going -- and where they think they could be going, given current trends. The key to usability here is that word trends. Any information you can pull together about changes in your account's business environment, about threats to their position from their competitors, about the direction their business is taking, about their mission -- all these things can help you devise a strategy that ties in with, and perhaps complements, their strategic concerns.

Here's an example from our own business. A couple of years ago, while doing research on one of our clients, we discovered two critical facts. One, their profits were down. Two, their anticipated growth was offshore.

We found plenty more facts, of course. But to the Miller Heiman team that was setting strategies for this large account, we emphasized the importance of these two. Both told us something about change in the customer's environment: Clearly, profits and international expansion were trend issues. At the same time, both related to our business. Our programs could help increase the customer's sales productivity and thus profits, and we saw a new market opening for us in the firm's international group. Just two examples of perfectly usable bits of account data.

Where do you find such information? Here's where we advise you to look:

- **Your own sales data. This includes both "past" and "future" data**
- **The account's reports. This means, minimally, its latest annual report. It could also include the firm's 10K report, annual reports from the past two or three years, recent quarterly reports, promotional brochures, and product and service literature**

- **Investment opinions.** If you're dealing with a public company, assessments of its stock's viability can provide a useful "health check." Such opinions can come from television commentators, from newspaper reports, and from investment firms' literature
- **The print media.** We recommend that your team assign one person to scour the Internet, reading recently published articles on your account and on its industry, then print out four or five articles that focus on industry changes and trends
- **People in the account.** Insiders again. Ask them about what you find in the press. Add to your knowledge of the account, and get a fix on where they think they are, by asking the people you're selling to directly

We recommend that the information you pull together be made available to each team member before you begin setting strategy. This doesn't mean everybody should memorize every line in the account's financial report. It does mean that everybody on your account team should know how the account is currently positioned in the business environment, and what issues and trends are likely to affect the way you and this customer work together.

CREDIBILITY: THE BEDROCK OF SALES SUCCESS

IMPROVING YOUR POSITION WITH ECONOMIC BUYERS

Credibility is the bedrock of sales success. In dealing with key buying influences you have to establish your credibility. This means not only your personal credibility, but your company's too. In establishing it, we've found four techniques to be especially effective. These are like-rank selling, the advertisement of past successes, executive briefings, and bringing in the services of an expert or "guru."

LIKE-RANK SELLING

Although it's your responsibility as the orchestrator of your sales objectives to see that every buying influence base is adequately covered, you may not always be the best person to sell to each of these key individuals. That's why we encourage team selling, and to set up meetings between buyers and sellers of like rank. Since executives and other business people are often most comfortable talking to their peers, your own boss (to use just one example) might find it a lot easier to establish credibility with your economic buying influence than you would.

Your job is to be sure that the person best qualified to do so covers each buying influence base. Economic buyers are seldom reluctant to exchange ideas with management peers. If you can arrange for your economic buyer to visit one of your company facilities where that's possible-or, even better, if you can bring one of your company executives to this key player -- you'll be using like-rank selling effectively.

Putting executives together like this has the added advantage of showing the economic buyer that your company is committed, from senior management on down, to your proposal. This in turn has a significant spin-off effect: It provides a public demonstration of your personal value, thus establishing your credibility for future sales.

ADVERTISING PAST SUCCESSES

You can also arrange for your economic buying influences to visit a customer installation where you have a successful track record, and where by definition you'll be immediately distinguished from the competition. By showing how your product or service has worked well for another client, you demonstrate credibility, and also bring the economic buyers the one thing they most want: direct information about how to improve their own businesses.

THE EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

The executive briefing is used frequently in the fields of packaged goods and consumer products. Many of our Fortune 500 clients in these fields give such briefings once or twice a year to executives in their national accounts. At these periodic presentations, they review with their economic buyers the results and wins they've provided in the recent past, and suggest future joint ventures that will ensure that the customers will continue to win. Even when there is no specific proposal on the table, the selling firm is thus still able to reinforce the satisfactions that its customers have enjoyed as a result of their previous associations.

BRINGING IN A "GURU"

A guru is someone with expertise in an area that exerts influence on business trends. This expert may or may not be from your company, and may or may not be well versed in your particular business.

Economic buyers achieve their positions of authority in part because they're receptive to new ideas. The advantage to you of arranging a meeting between a guru and your economic buyer is that it will introduce that person to new ideas. Not so incidentally, the credit will go to you, as well as to the guru, because of your part in making the expertise available.

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In addition, employing a guru can allow you to bring your knowledge to the economic buying influence, and

the credibility of the information will be enhanced because it's coming from an impartial expert.

For example, having an R&D expert tell an economic buyer that your company is at the cutting edge of a certain technology may be a much more effective way of getting your message through than you saying, as a sales representative, "We've got the best stuff on the market."

The guru technique is used with some frequency -- and with extraordinary effectiveness -- in dealings between major firms. It's a way not so much of facilitating specific sales as of establishing a history of healthy interaction, in which key players at both the firm that supplies the guru and the firm that receives new knowledge see themselves as having won.

These four techniques are only samples. You may come up with other techniques that are also effective in improving your position with economic buyers. Use anything that works, of course, as long as you're sure that you're delivering what the economic buyer always needs -- knowledge to improve his or her forecasting ability -- and that you're delivering it in a win/win manner.