



# How to Gain Executive Access

Strategies for setting more meetings

Keep it simple. Drive results.



# Think like an executive

## Insight

Buyers felt that sales reps were always effective in engaging executives/C-suite and decision-makers only 34% of the time.

*ValueSelling Associates-Training Industry Report, Sales from the Buyer's Perspective, 2018*

Today, technology tools might accelerate online connections. AI may shorten the time to insight. But in the end, you still need to get in front of someone to sell something. We say: everything old is new again.

As sales professionals, our goal is to create solid, long-standing relationships with prospects and customers. We want to understand their business and add value to their strategic initiatives. We need to position ourselves as business partners—a “go to resource” — rather than “vendor support.”

By developing deeper relationships, we have a strategic advantage over the competition and can lock them out. We can help influence and/or define the specs and requirements for a buyer's future needs. We can be more quickly forgiven if something goes wrong.

The most effective salespeople gain access to key decision makers. Given the obstacles, how do you gain executive access? How do you engage them?

It starts by thinking like an executive.

### What's in it for them?

Executives are big people who make big decisions for big dollars to net big results. To get their attention, understand their business. Focus on how they will realize value. Talk about the most pressing business issues and financial metrics that impact them.

### Engage vs. pitch

Nobody wants to be sold. People want to invest in something that yields a return. Instead of a pitching products and features, engage in a business conversation that centers on value: insight into their industry, a solution, an innovation, or anything they consider of value.

### First impressions are lasting

Preparation and execution is critical. You've got to be credible, which means demonstrating you are a believable and reputable source of insight, products and services. Avoid asking questions you should know the answers to, i.e., “What business are you in?”

### Persistence pays off

The more you attempt access, the more likely you'll get access. Timing is critical so be there when they're ready. Respectful persistence is about consistent communication that stays relevant. Don't assume you can't get the meeting or that the current contact will be a gatekeeper. Ask!

### Next →

The 4 keys to gaining executive access: identify, access, validate, maintain.



# 01. Identify

It is critical to identify 'power,'—the person or people with the authority to sign off on a project and ability to create or change the budget. But power is often elusive and difficult to confirm in an organization.

In the past, managers could make a buying decision. Today, the decision has been elevated two to three levels. Previously, one person was the decision maker. Now, there are committees with lots of people involved in researching, vetting and selecting vendors.

Ways to identify power:



## Research

With all the information available online, there's no excuse for starting a sales call unprepared. The first step is LinkedIn where you'll find a person's current responsibilities, previous jobs, articles posted, and groups they are part of. Look for shared connections, an effective way to get an introduction.

Check their Twitter and Facebook accounts to get a sense of their interests. Read the company's recent press releases, financial statements and social media posts. Finally, search your company's CRM system to discover if, and when, the person has interacted with your organization.



## Referral

If you have a shared LinkedIn connection, ask your contacts who they think you should talk to, and who they can introduce you to.

If you get a referral, your chances of getting a meeting increase dramatically. A Nielsen survey reports that 92% of buyers trust referrals from people they know. If you've got happy customers, ask them for a referral.



## Network

Whether offline or online, networking is a great way to get introduced to power. Your business network is key. Think '6 degrees of separation.' The more people you know, the more you can connect to others. You can also meet power as they pursue outside interests at non-profit events, sporting venues or industry trade shows.

Remember, you can't sell to somebody who can't buy! Connect with power or those who can introduce you to power to shorten the buying cycle.

## Insight

**84% of buyers now kick off their buying process with a referral.**

*Harvard Business Review, How B2B Sales Can Benefit from Social Selling, November 2016*



# 02. Access

Prepare your introduction: As you open the first meeting or sales call, you need to immediately demonstrate that you're believable and trustworthy.

At ValueSelling Associates, we recommend you prepare a credibility introduction, a 1-minute introduction that includes a situation similar to your prospect's, challenges that your product/service addresses, and the measurable impact you achieved by solving the problem. Think of it as an 'elevator pitch' that gets tailored to each person you're speaking with.

## Create a campaign

An effective way to gain direct access to a decision maker is through multiple impressions in a short period of time. Based on your research, you can predict what unresolved business issues they have and create a targeted campaign to that individual decision maker. Then, use various communication methods—phone, email, InMail, snail mail—to request a meeting where you'll discuss the unresolved issue(s).

## Use AIM

An AIM campaign includes emotional triggers that make your communications more relevant and compelling.

## Bargain for access

Get into an organization at the highest level you can. Then, identify other stakeholders and trade resources to access them. Anytime someone asks you for something—a presentation, demo, reference or access to a subject matter expert—you can negotiate to get access to their decision maker or other stakeholders. A key bargaining chip is 'top-to-top' access—your executive to their executive.

## AIM involves:

- Anxiety:** A feeling of worry, nervousness or unease about something with an uncertain outcome
- Influence:** The action or process of producing effects on the actions, behaviors, opinions, etc. of another or others
- Motivation:** Having a strong reason to act or accomplish something

## Make it your modus operandi

Build in 'access' as the normal way of doing business. Set the rules of engagement, which includes identifying stakeholders and meeting with them as early in the buying cycle as possible. If you're not meeting with power people, then you're spending time, energy and resources on an unqualified opportunity. Of course, there will be gatekeepers: middle managers, administrative assistants, technology gatekeepers, spam filters, and so on. Turn them into bridge builders by asking for their help or partnering with them.

## Insight

While 64% of the C-suite has final sign-off, 81% of employees not in the C-suite influence purchasing decisions.

*Google/Millward Brown Digital, B2B Path to Purchase Study, 2014*



# 03. Validate

Sometimes you'll meet with a person who says they are the decision maker, but that's not the case. If you don't validate power, you can get blindsided by identifying the wrong people or not gaining access to all the decision makers in the process.

It's alluring to spend time developing relationships with people who are neither decision makers nor influencers involved in purchasing your products or services. Make your job easier by validating you are speaking to power with these steps.

## Triangulate

Minimize your risk of relying on one person's perspective regarding how the decision gets made and who is involved. Triangulation is a research method where you get multiple perspectives—at least three people in different roles—throughout your prospect's or client's organization. Ask each contact the same questions to verify or hone in on the truth. For example, "Who makes the final purchasing decision in this division?"

## Note their experience

Has the person you are speaking with "been there and done that" before? What type of experience do they have with the purchases you are discussing? Do they have the confidence and competence to make the final buying decision?



## Evaluate the conversation

Are you engaged in a business conversation or a product conversation? If you are in the mud talking about product features, most likely, you are not dealing with the ultimate decision maker. Rather, you are stuck with the person delegated to do the homework, evaluate and recommend a solution.

## Insight

**65% of sales leaders say their top challenge is reps spend too much time not selling**

*SiriusDecisions, 2016*



# 04. Maintain

Once you've accessed power, the key is to maintain a connection. Perhaps the buying decision is slated to happen several quarters from now. Or the decision maker is juggling other priorities. The last thing you want to do is lose ground in the relationship building and then be forced to start at Square One when time is of the essence. Here are additional strategies to maintain access to power.

## Planned access

Let's say you get a meeting with the ultimate decision maker. But she says, "Okay, I need you to meet with my staff so they're involved in the process. Then, I'll decide."

The best strategy is to negotiate your next meeting before agreeing to such a request. We call that 'planned access.' Plan your next meeting with the power person and make sure that access is available in the future.

## Conditional access

If the strategy of planned access is unsuccessful, then you'll want to negotiate for what we call 'conditional access.' Determine the scenarios or conditions when you might need to have another meeting with the power person. Then ask, "If these conditions aren't met/the timeframe isn't adhered to/progress stalls, then can I get your commitment to re-involve you in a conversation?"

Try not to leave the meeting or end the call without a planned meeting, or worst case, the conditions for calling the next meeting. By pre-negotiating continued access, you can shorten your sales cycle.

## Overdeliver value

You can continue to increase your credibility by sharing current information and expertise on topics that interest the decision maker, especially as it relates to their pressing business issues.

Maintain contact by sending relevant thought-leader pieces—industry reports, white papers, infographics, case studies, success stories—that would give the decision maker new ideas and insights. These tidbits will help reinforce your ability to deliver, or even better—overdeliver, value.

## Don't give up

Typically, a person has to receive a message 10 to 12 times before what you have to say sinks in. Think about the barrage of messaging an executive gets. The messages that stand out are those that focus on: "What's in it for them?" Are you memorable...in a good way?

If you properly identify, access, validate and maintain your connection with power, you will have earned a continuing dialogue and ongoing relationship with decision maker.

## Insight

**When do buyers prefer to interact with vendors in their decision-making process? Buyers want to engage with vendors throughout the process.**

*Sales from the Buyer's Perspective, 2018*



# About ValueSelling Associates®

ValueSelling Associates, Inc., a leading global sales training company, offers a practical methodology for selling on value, not price. The ValueSelling Framework® is a proven formula that simplifies the complex B2B sale. Once trained on the ValueSelling method, organizations grow revenue and increase productivity. Since 1991, thousands of sales and customer-facing professionals around the world have chosen ValueSelling Associates for customized training, reinforcement and consulting to drive sales results.

Connect and learn more.



T. 1-800-559-6419

E. [Info@valueselling.com](mailto:Info@valueselling.com)

[valueselling.com](http://valueselling.com)

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