

Politics in the sales process

Two years ago I tried to sell my consulting services into a large company in the financial sector. I made a good contact right at the beginning with a senior manager, Simon. We had an excellent discussion about an organisation structure review, and things looked promising. The only cloud on the horizon was that his boss, (Neil), was not interested in the kind of things we were discussing. However, I checked on his decision-making responsibility, and he seemed to operate with great autonomy. "My boss lets me do what I like, as long as I deliver the numbers." I followed up gently, but a big silence ensued. It transpired that Simon had been promoted and transferred to the States.

Undeterred, I found him and made contact again. Who was his successor, and would he recommend me to him or her? He readily agreed, told me his successor was called Elaine, and then copied me on an email which sent all kinds of alarm bells ringing. It was written as if to a stranger, and demonstrated clearly that he had at best no relationship with her, and at worst a bad one. I had made a serious political mistake. I tried to contact Elaine after this, but you will not be surprised to learn that she was always just that bit too busy to see me. A recommendation from her predecessor was probably a stamp of disapproval. I would have done better to approach her cold.

This illustrates the kind of problem that internal politics can create in the sales process – as if it were not difficult enough! Unless you are dealing with the person at the very top of the organisational tree, you need to know what pressures are on your contact. This does not mean you should always go to the top. It's good to aim high, but if, in this example, I'd gone to Simon's boss, I would never have got anywhere at all. Simon was the right level, particularly as I'd checked that he was a budget-holder, with the autonomy to authorise a project of the size we were discussing. If he had only stayed long enough, all would have been well.

What I failed to do was to check with Simon on his relationship with Elaine. He didn't know me well enough for the frank comment, but I'm sure he would have told me enough to read between the lines.

"Well, I'm sure she's very effective, but in a very different way from me. She's very close to Neil, you know – tends to do things his way." This would have told me a great deal, and I might have asked:

"So if I asked you to recommend me to Elaine, do you think that would be the best first contact, or should I approach her another way?"

"Well, I'll be happy to recommend you, of course, but I'm not sure it will help a lot. I expect she's got a very big broom out, so anything from the past...."

"Do you know of any hot buttons I could press?"

Had I had this conversation, it might have been more fruitful, if only to tell me not to waste my time with Elaine and Neil, as Simon had already told me that Neil was not interested in the kind of thing we were discussing.

Things do not always get easier when you manage to get into an organisation, as illustrated by this story from James, who specialises in image work. He won a small contract to do some image work with the sales team of a new division of a multinational. The Training Department organised a meeting with the Divisional Sales Manager, Brian. It went well, he did the work, built a good relationship with the team. He did not get around to meeting anyone from Training, and he was working up to asking Brian if he could talk to his boss, when the Division was closed down, with no warning, and Brian was asking Jim if he knew of any opportunities.

“Afraid not, Brian, but I’ll keep my ear to the ground. In the meantime I wonder if you could do something for me. I’d really like to meet your Sales Director....”

“Well, you can try, but he’s busy fighting the Americans over this restructuring. He wasn’t consulted, you know.”

“I was hoping you would introduce me.”

“I’m persona non grata with him at the moment. You’d do better on your own, besides, I don’t think he’s very interested in image work right now.”

All very true, and Jim has missed his opportunity. With hindsight he sees that he should have made early contact with Training, and kept them well informed of progress. He should also have asked for a meeting with the Sales Director part way through the project. Long enough to show some results, but not too long, in case something happened to bring his contract to a premature close. As he had done neither of those things, he has not been able to get back into that client.

Sally was called in to do some specialist HR work for a manufacturing company. She soon found that her sponsor was Peter, a long serving HR manager in the UK, now very threatened by a newly appointed HR director in Europe, Miriam. Sally has lots of European expertise, and saw a great opportunity to extend her work. However, she found that Peter was totally unwilling to allow her access to anyone else in the organisation, and it became apparent that if she did so, she would risk her relationship with him.

She tries a different tack. “Peter, when I’ve finished this work for you, do you think that there would be a similar opportunity in Europe, where I have a lot of experience.”

“I’ve no idea. I doubt it.” Peter looks defensive.

“Do you think it would go down well with Miriam if you were to suggest it?”

This obviously has an effect.

“Let me think about it.”

“If you could show me what contracts they are using in Europe, or give me any information which would enable me to...

“Leave it with me.”

The risk Sally is taking here is that Miriam does not rate Peter, and will not be interested in his recommendation, as in the first case that we looked at. The upside of this strategy is that she is working with Peter, and not against him. If she can get sufficient information from him about European needs, then she can help Peter to make a good impression with Miriam, in offering Sally's services to Europe. This is the perfect win/win, if she can bring it off. Whatever happens, she retains her relationship with Peter, and if Miriam turns down the offer because she doesn't rate Peter, the chances are she would do that anyway, since whatever other approach Sally made, she would still find out that she is working with Peter.

All of these examples illustrate the importance of understanding the power structure of your prospect or client. If you win business from a client who for reasons of position in the hierarchy, or personality, is not firmly established in the central power base of the organisation, then find ways of getting to people who are. This is obviously a reason to sell to a senior level in the first place, but business does not always work that way. It is critical not to upset your client by doing this, as the likelihood is that they will feel insulted by the request, unless you handle it very carefully. With some clients you can be frank: "I'd really like to meet your boss, Peter, before this project comes to a close, to see if there are other opportunities for me in the rest of the organisation." Some clients will resist – may not even have told their boss they are using you. It is always a case of balancing the relationship with your client against the opportunities elsewhere. You could end up losing everything if you are not careful!

The steps to follow for an existing client are:

Assess your client's position in the power structure, and how secure they are in it.

Identify the highest position(s) in the power structure who would be involved in using your services

Devise creative ways to meet your target "prospects" which will not upset your client.

The steps to follow for a prospect are to very carefully identify who you are going to sell to in the power structure. The more research you can do, and information you can obtain in this process, the better. It is always easier to start at senior level and move down in the sales process, and very hard to reach a director when you started selling to a junior supervisor. Aim high in every sense!

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