

Avoiding the Dark Side

There is a Dark Side for which selling organizations need to be prepared. Given the ebbs and flows of economic cycles and business dynamics, sometimes—for reasons beyond your control—something will change to threaten your relationship with a customer. In what ways can you demonstrate your value?

Economic downturn, weak financial markets, lackluster sales, budget cuts, lay offs. Business challenges come fast and furious in today's turbulent economy. Many of the factors facing your customer are out of your control, yet they will definitely have an impact on your ability to sustain the business relationship. As customers more closely scrutinize buying decisions and re-evaluate value, the degree to which you can weather the storm depends on how much you have invested in locking in value as a priority. Investing in customer relationships and consistently articulating and delivering value is the only secure way to hold on tight to key customers.

The case for relationship investments

The strength of customer relationships will determine the competitive performance of your organization in both the good times and the bad. To develop and maintain those relationships means delivering value in your customers' terms. Do you have a solid understanding of your customer's industry? Who are their customers and how do they sell? Is there the potential for disruption to their markets from new technologies, competitors, or regulation? The perception of how a seller behaves, and what he does to help a customer, are the determinants of the value he brings.

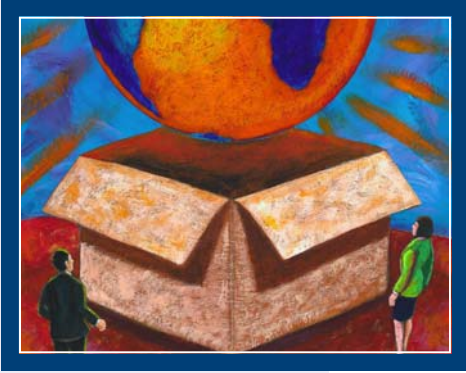
To begin the customer relationship-development process, you'll want to answer a few basic questions:

- What are my customer's most important business drivers and issues?
- Who are the right people within the customer organization with whom we can align mutual interests?
- Who in our organization should interact with and cover the customer organization hierarchy?
- What is our strategy to intentionally and actively deliver value and measure progress?
- How do we mitigate the risk for our customers and our relationships?

Making organization charts come to life

To understand your customer's organization and the dynamics of their decision-making process, it is imperative to know early on the roles people will play in the buying process:

- Who will make the decision?
- Who will approve it?
- Who will influence it?
- Who will implement it?



Focusing on your customer's organizational map gains insights into the most important people, the lines of influence, and the beneficiaries of the solutions. You can also determine who is most exposed in a prevailing economic situation. Demonstrating your knowledge of your customer's organization and your understanding of the issues that challenge it is a first step in being viewed as a valued partner.

With the organization mapped, you can validate an appropriate coverage strategy. Since there is not enough time or energy for an individual salesperson to develop high-value relationships with every person in an account, it is important for your selling team members to enroll their counterparts in your customer's organization. You'll want to convincingly demonstrate that you have considered possible ramifications within their sphere of influence and have addressed them. Having them "on your side" alleviates organizational jockeying and reduces the strain and pull on the primary decision maker. Plus, these contacts may uncover greater value by surfacing information, insights, or opportunities.

The concept of gifts

Increasingly, customers are asking sellers, "What else can you do for me? What other value-added benefits can you bring?" A clear way to demonstrate your commitment to a customer relationship is to work on it in some way every day by consistently providing extra value or services. The concept of gifts, or value deliverables, is a powerful way to solidify your customer relationships over and above the "normal" process of selling. The value is determined by what the customer perceives as valuable to him/her, to his/her company, and to the company's future. High-value actions include best-practices benchmarking, innovation, technology-sharing, problem-solving, competitive analysis, and referrals. These actions demonstrate your understanding, your commitment, and your focus on making your customer successful and add up to your becoming a trusted advisor. When the relationship is at risk due to external factors or changes, it is this bank of gifts that will differentiate and sustain your relationship.

Your investments in relationships not only can sustain business during uncertainty, they also pay dividends in identifying creative ways to demonstrate value. Seller-customer collaboration is a natural outcome of tight, intertwined relationships. As your customers try to maximize the value that they get from suppliers in an increasingly fast-paced and commoditized market, and you try to focus their efforts on the best returns for the energy you've invested, collaboration yields higher levels of success for both companies—and helps you avoid the Dark Side.

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