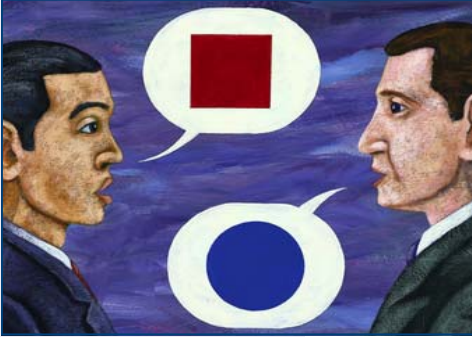


How to Have High-Value Conversations with Your Clients— Even When Their Hair's on Fire

by Ken Evans



What's the best way to prepare for and execute successful sales calls that move opportunities and relationships forward? These must-do's will help you make an extraordinary impression, accomplish multiple key objectives, and keep the door open for future contacts.

Executive relationships are hard to establish and maintain—especially when your client's hair is on fire. In today's economy, executives are frantically trying to respond to a blitzkrieg of bad news from their markets, customers, bankers, suppliers, owners, and staff. It has never been more critical to ensure that every encounter you and your selling team have with them results in a high-value conversation—from the executives' perspective.

Conversations with clients are at the heart of all sales activities. The quality of conversations is what moves relationships forward. High-value conversations need to occur from prospecting, throughout the sales process, to closure.

At Critical Path Strategies, our clients compliment us for many things, but our work with their teams to prepare and execute high-value conversations always receives the most kudos. I think part of it comes from the mantra that we espouse—**Selling is a series of conversations resulting in joint commitments to common goals.** To understand this mantra, let's break it down into bite-size pieces.

Selling is a series...

There are no more one-call closes. Clients tell us, as does supporting research, that it takes north of seven touches to get the first initial commercial sale or engagement. Your touches must be designed to demonstrate enough credibility and intimacy that someone will invest in the first relevant conversation. You and your team need to know your clients' business drivers, and find the highest-value linkages between your company and your clients.

Oftentimes, you are exploring for the right person to meet. Research indicates that investments of any consequence are made by a network of people on the buying side. You know their names—decision makers, approvers, influencers, users. It takes continuous interaction—and lots of repetitions—to frame the underlying value of what you offer and how to effectively deliver the value message across your clients'

organization. You need to be crisp on the net value you can provide and align that message to each individual to get traction during a blitzkrieg.

Conversations...

Wikipedia yielded this definition of a conversation: “the use of speech for informal exchange of views, ideas, or information.” I like it. Exchange suggests that the conversation is two-way—not a one-way pitch. The definition infers that two parties might ask each other questions to determine perspectives. It also allows for the concept of collaborating on ideas and information.

If you are to have valuable conversations for executives, you need to get into their shoes to plan the conversation. Where are they today? What are their aspirations? What are they doing about it? Once you are on the call, you can assess the value that your counterpart might realize.

Conversations get started and flourish because of great questions. What are the three questions that will get you talking substantively about a particular topic you know would be relevant to your counterpart?

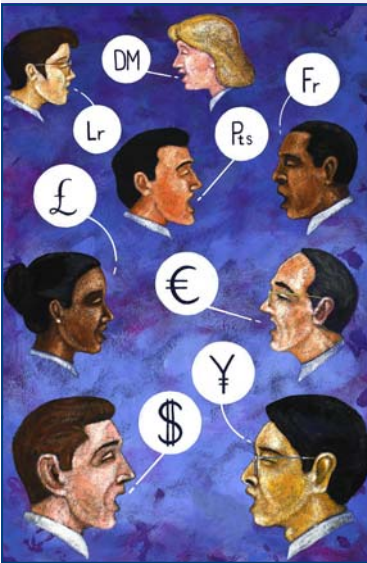
Resulting in joint commitments...

A good conversation for a salesperson results in the client and the salesperson both committing to an action that creates momentum. Too many salespeople make “milk and cookie calls.” The salesperson feels good. The client feels good. But nobody does anything. Executives are intolerant of this kind of relationship. You need to propose some sort of plan to proceed and create accountability—and not just your accountability.

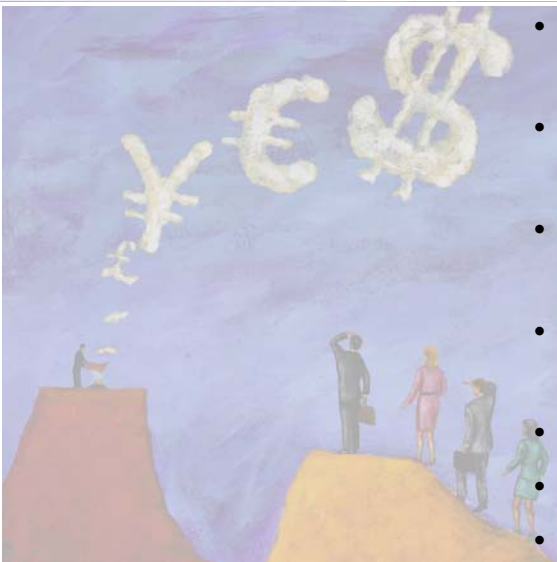
To common goals...

Here is the magic sauce—alignment to common goals. Your goal is to discover from your experience, your team’s acumen, and your company’s capabilities the short list of relevant value intersections with your client. If you articulate them well and line up on the most important intersections, how will you impact their business?

- What are your client’s critical success factors?
- What are their value differentiators for *their* clients? Articulating how their clients validate value, how it is measured, and how it is recognized is a great gift. And the value to you is tremendous.
- If your client is successful and executes well, what does that look like?
- How might you work together to lay out a plan for success?
- Will this alignment translate to your success as well?



Here are a few best practices for preparing for these important conversations with your clients.



- Do your due diligence. Do not ask about pains, needs, and burning platforms. You are supposed to know that.
- Envision the successful conversation. Imagine what you want to have happen after you leave your client's office.
- Determine your and your client's intent for the meeting. What are the primary and secondary objectives?
- What might you bring to this meeting that will benefit your client personally and professionally?
- What are the best questions to get the conversation going in the intended direction?
- Prepare a conversation opening—an ice breaker to dissipate the tension at the start.
- Lighten up a little. No one likes to be drilled.

Developing good professional relationships with clients is one of the best investments of time for you and your sales teams. Good relationships with your clients are built piece-by-piece, call-by-call, and experience-by-experience with a range of client contacts. They are based on creating value for them at every point of contact. To ensure that your clients perceive value and benefit from each interaction, it is imperative that your conversations with them are oriented toward their business issues and how your sales team can align with them to help deliver on their value propositions.

ABOUT CPS. Critical Path Strategies helps clients improve the effectiveness of their sales organization. Our portfolio of services addresses the strategic, organizational, and relationship issues that impact selling performance. Our powerful processes enable clients to transform their sales culture, enhance their competitive position, and accomplish strategic business initiatives. Our clients—emerging companies and members of the Fortune 500 alike—typically measure 100 to 500 times their CPS investment in revenue growth.



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