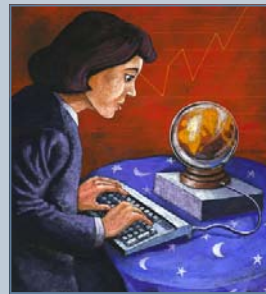


## *How to Keep Your Best Customers*

*Who is your best customer? Is it your largest? The most profitable? The one you talk to most?*

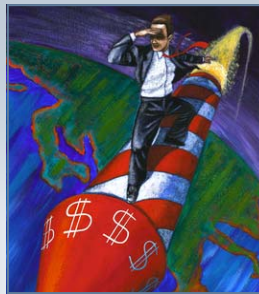
*Perhaps neither frequency nor volume defines your best customer. Perhaps it's the one who says you are their best supplier. These customers recognize how, at every interaction, you are oriented toward their business issues and help them deliver excellence to their customers. In most cases, with these customers there is the solid prospect of a growing profit annuity for a long, long time.*

Once you determine who your best customers are and have them engaged, how do you keep them? Interviews of hundreds of customers show that they have high expectations of those they consider partners. From their perspective, value is found in meeting any or all of the following needs.



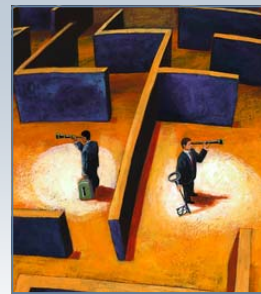
### Understand me:

- This starts and ends with listening. Things change in your customer's business and their markets—stay in tune.
- You must be part of the process. Not yours (although having one helps), but theirs. That keeps you in the game as a player, not a spectator.
- Be there—and not just when there is a deal on the table. Don't get stuck with only your agenda—stay in the present with their agenda.



### Be my focal point:

- To the outside world—competitors, suppliers, customers, innovators, investors. You are in a unique position to broaden their perspective.
- To others in their organization. Be an unbiased, informed resource. Tell them the good, the bad, and the ugly.



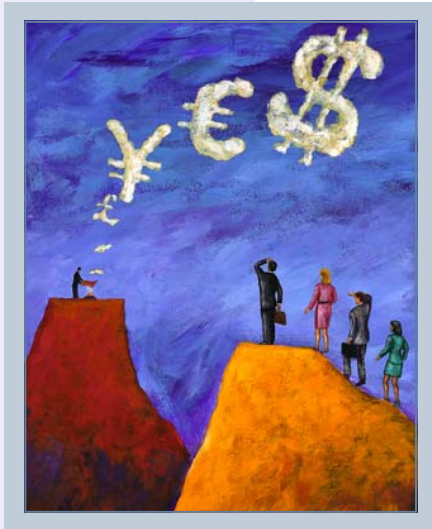
### Understand my alternatives:

- Understand their responsibilities to senior management and to others in their organization.
- Understand their constraints, and do not take them personally.



### Make me a winner:

- Make everyone on your customer's team a winner. Help coach them to success.
- Be the most important person on their team. If you are the MVP, it is unlikely you will get traded.



**With an understanding of what your customer wants, what can you do to effectively and efficiently manage these wants?** First of all, be selective. With multiple accounts and many customers, it is unlikely you can provide dedicated individual support to every important decision maker, approver, influencer, and user who resides within each customer organization. You need to prioritize them and direct your time and your teams accordingly.

**So what's the best way to develop a relationship plan with these most important people?**

1. Focus your key relationship initiatives on how you can affect their current priorities in the context of their long-term goals. Your actions will emphasize what you and your customer can do together to make them successful.
2. Expand your relationships within the customer organization. This will give you greater insight into the customer's interests and how to best serve those interests. In pursuit of the best opportunities, identify a chain of relationships to establish within the customer organization.
3. Provide your best customers with strategic, longer-view "gifts." Typical examples include market intelligence, best practices, new technology, and staff recommendations. In return, you gain insight and neuter competition. You also establish value versus price as the primary decision criteria.
4. Find the resource the customer will value most and deliver it. Customer knowledge, business acumen, and technical ability are obvious. The "softer" side, such as style, is equally important and often can make the difference in both result and efficiency.

Customers look to their best sellers/suppliers as a valued resource. By deploying resources to develop relationships with those customers who are likely to respond most favorably to your offering, you position yourself to be of great value to the client and they, in turn, become your best customers.

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