

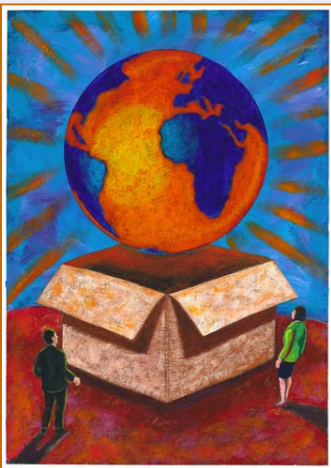
## Learn to Think Like Your Customers

by Peggy Besand

*The best account executives have a star quality of getting out of the box to identify customer needs that map to their company's competencies. How? They learn to think like their customers.*

*Breakout sellers position, tailor, and apply their products and services to appeal to their customers' criteria. They determine how to bring relevant value to customers within the range of their capabilities, and explore how to attract profitable customers who value what they are good at.*

*We asked some successful sales veterans to imagine that they are new account executives assigned to five key accounts. What are the top three things they would do to learn to think like their customers?*



### Conduct research on your assigned accounts.

It's critical to understand your customer's organization and business *before* attempting that first call. You can't assess the criteria your customer uses to meet its needs without some corporate intelligence.

Company Websites are fertile ground for learning about an organization, its products, and go-to-market strategies. In quarterly earnings conference calls, CEOs and CFOs inform Wall Street about their company's past performance, recent successes, and progress on key initiatives. These calls are usually recorded and posted online for replaying at your convenience.

Armed with this corporate knowledge, you're ready to "go local." One of the best sources of intelligence are colleagues who have had contact with your new customers. What do your customers have to say about your company? How do they use your product/service? Are you meeting their unique needs?

- Ask the previous account executives to share their recent history with your customers. Does your sales process mirror the way your customers want to buy? Who are the influencers within each company?
- Who on your customer service team currently supports your customers?
- Have your accounts payable department share payment history. Are there any service or delivery problems driving late payment?

Asking other colleagues about sales opportunities that may exist in accounts *like* these may reveal some cross-selling or up-selling opportunities that you may not know about.

### Meet the customer.

Once you've begun building your understanding of your new accounts, ask your predecessors to schedule a series of quick meetings with their executive contacts at the companies. Creating a **discovery call**





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**plan** with the previous account managers or your sales leader (or both) will help crystallize your first encounter with your new customers.

- What do you currently do well? What can you do better? Are there any outstanding issues?
- *Focus on opening the relationship, not closing the deal.* Seek ways to make your customers successful by exploring their key objectives that you identified during the research phase of your pursuit. You want to spend most of your time gathering information. To make this information-gathering phase as productive as possible, ask great questions and listen hard. Your goal for these first meetings is to establish rapport, open up the relationship, and begin the all-important process of discovering and learning so that you can create a compelling account strategy that aligns your company's strengths with your customers' business goals.

You'll want to schedule follow-up meetings with your customers to continue developing and executing the account strategy. You must understand how your product/service touches every aspect of their business. The more exposure you have to your customers, the more you will begin to think like them.

### Demonstrate professionalism and commitment.

Using information and insight gained from the initial and follow-up meetings, create **business gap assessments** that detail your customers' current state, desired future state, and key or strategic initiatives. Take care to use their terminology and phrasing—this is about their companies.

With the gap assessment as a guide, you can begin to align your company's strengths and core competencies to your customers' business drivers and competitive differentiators. What tangible, bottom-line impact can you have on their business? The game is value. The judges are your customers. Done well, a **customer value alignment** will be a strong basis for value discussions that lets your customers know that you think like them and are committed to making them successful. Don't assume your current product/service is the only thing you have to offer your customers. When approaching a strategic customer, step back and look at the assets that your entire company can bring to bear. Work the accounts at all levels, aligning your assets with your customers' needs in order to provide unique value and to keep competitors locked out.

Follow up with your customer executives to confirm that you've got it right in assessing their business. Share your value alignment and tell them, "This is what I'm going to be working on for the next 90 days," and ask them to confirm that you've developed the right strategy—or seek input on course correction if you are off target.

Sales is an art, but you are even more effective when supported by discipline. Whether you succeed in an account depends mainly on how well prepared you are, how closely you listen, how experienced you seem to be, and how well your customers think you will take care of them. Doing your homework, being well-prepared and customer-focused for all interactions, and following through on your commitments always differentiates you from the competition. And it's even more powerful when you learn to think like your customers.

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