



# Book Selling to the C-Suite

## What Every Executive Wants You to Know About Successfully Selling to the Top

Nicholas A.C. Read and Stephen J. Bistriz  
McGraw-Hill, 2009

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### Recommendation

If you are in sales, *BooksInShort* thinks you’ll like this book by Nicholas A.C. Read and Stephen J. Bistriz, who offer solid advice on how to sell to senior-level executives. They start by helping you identify and gain access to the “C-Suite” denizen – that is, the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Information Officer or other chiefs – you want to approach. The authors base their suggestions on hard data: the results of surveys conducted by Target Marketing Systems, Hewlett-Packard, the business school at the University of North Carolina and other institutions. Hundreds of senior-level executives answered survey questions about how they work with the “buying cycle” and with sales professionals. The authors derive useful lessons from this research to help salespeople transform themselves from “Commodity Suppliers” to “Trusted Advisers.” They explain the best tactics for getting to know executives, establishing credibility and making sales as an insider who has earned the boss’s confidence. The question is whether you can get upstairs the way they advise – by cultivating mid-level managers who can make that crucial suggestion to the top boss: “I know a salesperson you should meet.”

### Take-Aways

- To sell your product, target the executive suite leader with the most influence.
- Ideally, your first step is to identify a top-level executive who needs your product.
- Build the relationship in five more steps: Strategize your approach, do research, prepare for a meeting, prove your integrity and tell the client what you’ve done.
- To secure a meeting, obtain a referral from a respected person in the client’s firm.
- Impress the decision maker by offering a solution to a business problem.
- Be aware of the pressure-packed commercial drivers that affect your client’s decisions.
- Quantify your proposition with facts. What will your product do, and when will it do it? What will it cost – and save?
- As a salesperson, don’t become just a “talking brochure.” Be a “value creator.”
- Salespeople can be “Commodity Suppliers,” “Emerging Resources,” “Problem Solvers” or “Trusted Advisers” – becoming a trusted adviser is your goal.
- Audit how your product succeeds; report the result to your C-level client.

### Summary

#### Deliver Value, Not Product Details

If you are trying to make sales by being a “talking brochure,” you are missing the elevator to the executive office. C-level executives can learn all they want about your offering on your website. To sell, you must deliver more. Create value by helping clients find viable solutions to their problems. Making large sales requires spending time with relevant senior executives who can authorize or greatly influence purchases. Once you obtain a meeting with high-ranking people, your initial job is not to sell but to help them address their firms’ issues. Your goal is to become an adviser they call upon for data and support. Salespeople often climb four levels of proficiency on the way to becoming advisers:

1. **“Commodity Supplier”** – They meet their clients’ demands for goods, but that’s it.
2. **“Emerging Resource”** – They know their clients’ needs and have credibility.
3. **“Problem Solver”** – They see their clients’ perspectives and offer valued resources.

4. **“Trusted Adviser”** – They are alert to what their customers say and signal. As well-regarded insiders, they provide crucial information that clients want and develop valuable insights and deals.

## What Drives Executives?

To sell to executives, understand the “competitive drivers” that shape their decisions, affect their profits and could lead to “breakthrough initiatives” using your product or service. Each driver exerts intense pressure on C-level executives, who care more about how your product can address that pressure than about the features of the product. Frame your discussion around these drivers:

- **“Financial drivers”** – Bosses must perform, making earnings bigger or costs smaller.
- **“Operational drivers”** – Leaders must use every resource strategically.
- **“Supplier drivers”** – Executives build a firm’s role in its industry’s supply chain. Companies that sell fret about contracts. Firms that buy materials or goods worry about the reliability of their suppliers, economies of scale and similar issues.
- **“Business partner drivers”** – Bosses balance crucial alliances with allies and rivals.
- **“Customer drivers”** – Leaders worry about how their decisions will affect consumers.
- **“Competitor drivers”** – Old and new competitors exert pressure. Know the trends.
- **“Globalization drivers”** – Far-flung risks and opportunities shape market share, labor, production and more. Become knowledgeable so you can help navigate these waters.
- **“Regulatory drivers”** – Laws delineate decisions, ethics, protections and limitations.

## C-Suite Challenges

Learn your targeted company’s “buying cycle.” Timing is crucial. C-level executives usually participate in the buying process early on to “make sure the project’s on the right track.” They rarely become involved in the buying cycle’s middle and final stages. To build and maintain strong relationships with the right C-suite executives at the right firms for your product, take these six steps:

1. **“Identify the relevant executive”** – Learn who matters. Study influence patterns, rank and organizational dynamics to find the person who can attain the maximum benefit from your offering. Look for the leader with “the most skin in the game.”
2. **“Determine the best approach”** – Now you must maneuver past various gatekeepers to gain access. Persevere, working hard to learn the politics of the company, so you can bypass the gatekeepers and interact with influential insiders. But since you’ll have to work with the subordinates of a chief executive officer, chief information officer or chief financial officer before and after you make a sale, don’t alienate them on your way to the boss’s desk. Normally, reaching such a leader requires persuading a credible lower-level executive to “sponsor” you by suggesting a meeting, but you can also take an “overt,” direct approach or seek a more roundabout referral.
3. **“Perform the appropriate research before that critical first meeting”** – Be ready. That means learning what issues matter to the executive’s business and preparing answers to his or her questions. Meet with as many C-level people as possible to practice and become comfortable. For background information, use Internet resources such as [business.com](#) and [bizlink.org](#) and read relevant magazines, including *BusinessWeek*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *McKinsey Quarterly*, the *Economist* and the *Harvard Business Review*. Read the company’s press releases. Find out all you can about the executive. Check [brint.com](#), [CEOgo.com](#) and [faulkner.com](#). Find out what primary trends affect the executive’s company, where it fits in its industry and what goals it has set. Consider what questions you will ask the executive and what solutions you can offer.
4. **“Conduct an effective first meeting”** – Quickly adopt a long-term approach when you first meet with a senior executive. Focusing on a short-term sale is counterproductive. Work to establish a relationship that transcends immediate business concerns. Become a source of valuable information and insight. Your goal is to get the executive to think differently about the firm’s problems in light of how your product can help solve them.
5. **“Demonstrate integrity and capability”** – To enter the “client value zone,” show reliability, honesty and expertise. Caution: Not all clients want an intense relationship, and you can’t make this kind of maximum, in-depth connection with every customer.
6. **“Consistently communicate your value”** – Keep the executive posted about your contribution. Speak up directly but gracefully at the beginning and end of the sales cycle, and whenever else it’s appropriate. Chief executives like to know how their choices perform in practice.

## Getting Inside the Executive’s Office

The best way to gain access to senior-level executives is to have a trusted individual within the leader’s organization act as a sponsor and recommend seeing you. Thus, good networking includes cultivating relationships with respected mid-level executives, managers and assistants who can facilitate connections with senior-level executives. Of course, executive assistants, personal secretaries and other gatekeepers in a company often act as roadblocks, guarding senior-level executives from external intruders. Effective ways to circumvent them include:

- Refer to some new change within your company and schedule a meeting to offer details and information.
- Agree to meet with a junior executive, but request a follow-up meeting with the boss.
- Gain admittance to an important industry event.

“When you sell to executives, the time it takes to go from spiel to deal is often shorter, but you must frame your discussion around why this project is the right horse to back.”

Before you undertake strenuous efforts, ascertain again that the executive you’ve targeted is totally pertinent to your sales. The wrong person may be very important but have nothing to do with buying. Don’t waste time or energy. To identify the most relevant senior executive, ask:

- **“Who will really evaluate, decide or approve the decision?”** – Normally, the executive who puts a project in motion will have the authority to approve needed purchases. He or she is a vital decision maker, but not always the ultimate one. Often, a more senior executive must also approve purchases. Reach out to the leader who has direct involvement, influence and vested interest in a venture’s successful outcome, plus sufficient rank and power to affect the results. A

good message delivered to the wrong executive will get you nowhere.

- **“Who has the highest rank and greatest influence?”** – Organizational charts may help you uncover this person. Obviously, titles do not always mirror actual power.

“The last 40 years of corporate sales training have been based more on anecdotes and folklore than on any real science.”

Check four professional criteria to be sure you’ve found the most relevant executive:

1. **“Track record”** – He or she is a successful leader within the organization.
2. **“Value”** – Other executives believe this leader makes a genuine contribution.
3. **“Network”** – This person is tightly plugged in, closely bound to others in the organization “by mutual advantage,” the quality that the Chinese call *guanxi*.
4. **“Will”** – The individual has amassed enough extra influence to control company events and activities and to alter the firm’s status quo.

## On the Other Side of the Door

Once you finesse your way into the C-suite for an interview, enter the room fully prepared. The first few minutes will be extremely important. Your research should give you a good idea of the executive’s “business agenda”; try to ascertain his or her “personal agenda” as well. You’ll be more effective if you can help with both. Introduce yourself and explain the purpose of the meeting. Demonstrate that you have done your homework and understand the company, its challenges and its place in the industry. Some additional tips:

- **Forget your product’s...“bells and whistles”** – Focus on large business issues.
- **Use intelligent questions** – Find out what matters most to the executive. Frame everything according to the drivers that affect the business and to the metrics that the leader uses to monitor and evaluate activities. Don’t ask naive questions.
- **Listen as much as possible** – You can’t learn the chief’s primary concerns if you do all the talking. As much as you can, listen and don’t speak. Hear what he or she outlines before proposing any steps of your own. Don’t get into the solutions aspect of your conversation until later in the meeting, when you can respond to the executive’s stated concerns. Make sure your solutions deliver genuine value.
- **Discuss novel business perspectives and concepts** – Provide a new frame of reference that adds depth to the conversation.
- **End by proposing a specific “next step”** – Involve the executive directly in planning subsequent action. Plan to connect again to follow up. Suggest that next time you could bring an expert “solution manager” to move the conversation to another level.

“A lot of salespeople...say they have the answer before they know what the problem is.”

If you are an incumbent on the company’s sales account, build credibility by explaining that progress suggests that it is time for a change in the products the executive’s firm buys from yours. In all cases, match your message to the senior executive’s personality. If the executive is conservative and your solution increases efficiency, speak of “time, money and saved resources.” If the executive is pragmatic and your solution improves quality, frame your discussion in “quantitative and qualitative” terms. Selling a new solution is easier if you are talking to an executive who is innovative, open-minded and visionary. Introduce value at three distinct stages:

1. **“Value hypothesis”** – All salespeople promise to bring value to the client. However, without the customer’s validation, all you have is a hypothetical intention.
2. **“Value proposition”** – To develop a proposal for contributing real value, you need concrete data from the executive about how the company operates, what its costs are and what dysfunctions you might be able to fix. Create your value proposition from this information. Often, it will take form along these lines: “You want to do Z, which we can deliver at a cost of Y. This will reduce current costs by X and improve efficiency by W, which, over the space of V months with U people using it, will enable you to recoup your initial cost within T months.” Quantify everything.
3. **“Value statement”** – After you make the sale, audit the company’s use of your product, so you can report on its actual value and solid benefits. Enumerate your results based on the figures in your value proposition.

“There’s nothing like the thrill of closing a big deal – especially when it comes with the help of that Trusted C-suite Adviser in the client organization who was working behind the scenes to help.”

Dealing with C-suite executives is a “learned skill” you must develop and practice. Expect to feel uncomfortable in the beginning. However, as you meet with numerous high-ranking executives and begin to become a trusted adviser in their eyes, you will be increasingly comfortable with powerful people. More importantly, they will be comfortable with you. To follow this C-suite formula and close more large sales, consistently deliver value and look for ways to improve. That is the best way to guarantee loyal repeat customers.

## About the Authors

**Nicholas A.C. Read**, winner of the 2005 Independent Business Awards’ “Best Sales Trainer” recognition, leads a sales consulting firm. **Stephen J. Bistriz**, Ed.D., who has more than 40 years of sales experience, heads a sales training firm.

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