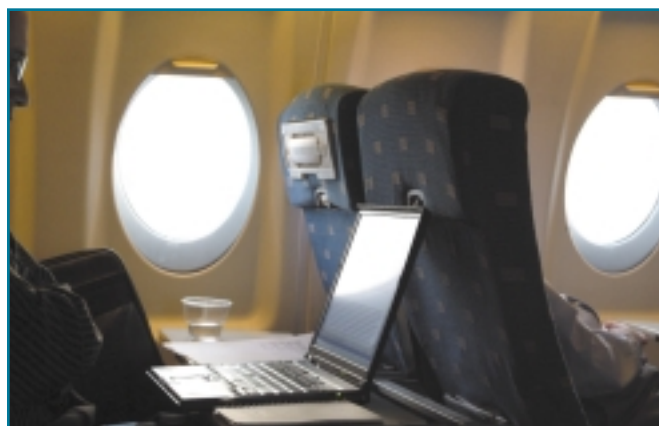


# Selling at the 'C' Level

## Use consultative due diligence 'at 40,000 feet'

by: Steven Power, Sales & Marketing Solutions International

**T**he needs-assessment step in the sales process is one of the longest-running traditions in the sales profession. It is at the heart of sales training programs delivered worldwide. In fact, sales training in this area is so similar from industry to industry that I can go anywhere and ask salespeople to recite the "standard-issue" questions they ask to determine the prospect's needs or, as many put it, to "qualify" prospects.



"What are your objectives?"; "What are your challenges meeting those objectives?"; and "What is the impact to your organization if those objectives are not achieved?"

Top-level executives eat, drink and sleep their objectives. They are constantly focused on the outcomes that they are personally responsible for delivering. Top-level people recognize their challenges and

These qualifying questions are usually served up in the first five minutes of the first sales call and are designed to determine the prospect's needs, decision-making time frame, budget and decision-making authority. While qualifying prospects has merits, when selling at the "C" level this old-school sales technique can be counterproductive and can lead to being quickly relegated downstairs to the purchasing department.

I believe you can and should create competitive distinction in every phase of the sales process. I also believe that your discovery process offers a perfect opportunity to get out of your box and ask some intriguing questions that your competitors probably are not asking and that your prospects are not expecting.

Top executives are visionaries and conceptual thinkers. They live in and think about the big picture. Many of them refer to this as viewing the world "from 40,000 feet." In order to create competitive distinction at this level, you will need big, intriguing questions that will capture their attention and hold their interest. You will need questions that will cause prospects to stop and think through their answers.

### Consultative Due Diligence

The first three standard-issue consultative questions — at the 40,000-foot altitude — that consultants are trained to ask are,

problems from a mile away. They also understand that there are consequences for not overcoming these challenges and delivering the desired results.

If you want to position yourself as a consultative resource to your prospects, get to know what they are trying to accomplish (their objectives), what is keeping them from accomplishing their objectives (their challenges) and what the ramifications are (both negative and positive) if they meet or do not meet their objectives.

### More 40,000-Foot Questions

Once you have asked the three standard-issue consultative questions, stay at the 40,000-foot altitude and continue to develop a clear understanding of the big picture.

Ask your prospects about their organizations' current business initiatives. These are specific projects currently being implemented throughout the organization. Examples are supply-chain management, customer-relationship management and sales-force automation, to name just a few. Other examples may include cost-cutting programs, consolidating workforces, shedding non-core business centers, expanding sales into international markets and launching new products or services.

Other questions that will help you gain insight into the big picture include:

- What significant changes are being made to your business model?
- What are the top trends forcing you to examine the way you do business?
- What strategic partnerships have you developed to assist you in meeting your objectives?
- Which of these partnerships are most unique and powerful and why?
- What pressures are you responding or reacting to?
- What are the driving forces being discussed in your management meetings?

There you have it. Asking questions about objectives, challenges, impacts, initiatives, changes to the prospect's business model, trends and strategic partnerships will give you a clear picture of what is going on at 40,000 feet. By asking consultative questions, you not only capture information that helps you determine how you can help your prospects, but you also get their attention and hold their interest, creating competitive distinction.

If you have implemented your consultative questions well, your prospects are now saying to themselves, "Finally, a salesperson who gets it at my level; someone who understands my world." This professional respect becomes the foundation of your relationship with "C"-level decision makers and paves the way for further opportunities to discover more about the prospect's business environment, which naturally leads to identifying selling opportunities along the way. ■

*Steven Power is founder and president of Sales & Marketing Solutions International. He has trained more than 15,000 business-to-business sales professionals in 19 countries and 12 industries. "PowerSelling — the Book" is Power's fully consultative and collaborative approach that combines his highly successful sales philosophy with his real-world consulting experience. His clients include Hewlett-Packard, Ricoh, Canon, AOL's Digital City and Staples Office Expo. "PowerSelling" is available at [www.powerselling.com](http://www.powerselling.com) or by telephone at (805) 650-1248.*

