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## Get connected and gain a competitive advantage

By John Salvatore

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if you were the sole provider of electrical supplies to a customer? That would be a situation that doesn't happen often. The reason why is because in just about every market you have multiple distributors vying for the same business. Thus one asks how they can make their company different from the competition. How can you exploit your strengths and gain share?

In order to gain share and grow your business you have to understand the competition and try to figure out what they have been doing and why the customer continues to do business with them. So how does one go about finding out what it will take to become the number one supplier? You have to start with the customer himself or herself and dig deep for answers. It is here where the sales team has to play a major role in understanding the issues that the client base has, it is their responsibility to obtain information and position their organization as one that adds value. Good sales managers make this "information gathering" and building new clients a part of the sales team compensation structure. As information is gathered it becomes a part of the company wide database for all to use.

Most customers will not share information with you just because you ask the question. You have to break into the account with something small and show some value, you have to make some kind of impact and earn some respect. One way to penetrate an account is to pick just one product such as fuses or lamps and gain that business only, use this as a base to grow your business and perform. Such as? Once you get on the radar screen then you begin to get into a position to ask for more. Many distributor salesmen get rejected up front because they ask for too much too soon. You have to earn your way in. You want your performance to be superior in every aspect of what you do, and then you are in a position to ask for more business and ask for more information about the competition.

I always try this method first because it gains you credibility and gets you in the game. Now you're in, what's next?

I try to position my company as one that deserves a chance for more business. I ask the probing questions which tend to make a buyer open up and you want him to believe that someday you want to be his/her top supplier. Ask questions about what they use for benchmarking performance of their top suppliers.

- What do you like about supplier 1
- Over the years, what have you typically used as your benchmark for on time delivery, fill ratio etc
- How frequently do you want to see a salesman
- What particular needs do you have from a training standpoint
- Is e-commerce important to you
- How do you typically like to have your orders placed
- What is your expectation on order turnaround
- Do you get prompt technical support
- What major lines do you use in your facilities or projects
- Do you purchase these lines from a specific supplier every time
- Do you have blanket agreements, if so, what do you typically break out as key RFQ sections of the bid package
- How important is price in your final decision
- Do you prefer lowest price versus year-end volume rebates?

These are just typical questions that the outside sales man can ask, but in order to be totally effective, your entire company has to work an account via level to level selling. You obviously can't do this for every account but for accounts that seem to be able to drive volume it is very essential to level to level sell. Your CEO or VP Sales will most likely be more effective negotiating terms of a sale with an owner of a contractor or a SVP of Global procurement. The outside salesman will be more effective in purchasing and

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on the shop floor and the technical support person will work better with engineering and the design team. Try to connect people that have common roles and needs and you'll get more mileage out of each inquiry.

With each situation, you need to build relationships first to position yourself as an information gatherer. You need to be able to gather facts about what drives the business decisions. You need to identify what are the customer pain points by department and what role individuals play in the decision making process. Once you gain this knowledge, then you will begin to see why they are buying from a certain supplier.

Maybe the answers will reveal some interesting ideas such as; they use Square D gear because the local distributor is always providing hands-on training for all their electricians after hours. They like AB PLC's because of the local distributors technical support team. They utilize Juno recessed lighting because their electricians feel it is the easiest and fastest product to install, they use XYZ Electric because they delivery the stock items right to the stock room itself. They don't use your company because you won't deliver to them daily. They buy products in kits from xyz because they utilize one part number for the entire kit.

You start to see the color of the picture when you are in a position to gather the facts. If you position yourself, as eager to earn and win business then you will get the right audience and you'll get respect.

With respect, you'll get the right information to be able to develop a walk forward plan. This new sales strategy will be developed with a keen awareness of your competitions strengths and weaknesses and via this wealth of knowledge, your new plan of attack should get you more share of the business as you attack the competition's weaknesses and deliver upon customers expectations.

Do your homework and have patience, this is a process not a one day effort. But when executed upon properly, the information that you gather on your competitors services will give you a distinct advantage in securing new business when the opportunity arrives. You'll know what the customer expectations are and where your competition is vulnerable. You'll be ready to react quickly with confidence!

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