

10 Rules of Engagement When Selling to Executives

By Joe Rickard

As printing technology evolves, creating new applications and uses of print, purchasing roles and influencers also begin to change. Printing salespeople will need to learn to move beyond traditional buying contacts to identify new users and influencers within their accounts, as well as comprehend the new rules of engagement.

In today's business world, the printing industry is competing for precious marketing and sales dollars. Understanding and following the new rules of engagement will not only generate new print solutions, but will also build long-term relationships with important decision makers.

So what are the 10 rules of engagement for selling in this new print economy? Here are my Top 10.

1. **Do not sell a specific solution:** Your job is to create enough interest in your ideas to gain support, to help you identify decision makers, and help you call on those other key people in the account. It is here you can gather enough facts to begin to build a compelling case that differentiates you from competitors, and gives you a major advantage in case the company requires a request for quote (RFQ).
2. **Use customer or personal references and/or internal champions to gain meetings:** Most executives will agree to see you if you have something to say, are relevant to them, or have a personal reference who recommends you.
3. **Do not waste the time of an executive:** You may only get one chance to sell your offerings. Executives are not interested in printing or graphic communications. They are interested in new ideas to improve their business.
4. **Invest in your knowledge:** Knowing the printing business is important, but in today's world it is not enough. Printing salespeople must be knowledgeable about all forms of customer communication. Executives have choices in how they invest their marketing dollars; print is only one of many options available to them. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of print versus alternatives will be appreciated by customers.
5. **Use facts and data:** Wherever possible, use business results and financial data to discuss the benefits of your solutions. Executives live in a world of analysis. Using facts and data is speaking in their language.

6. **Be prepared:** If you do not know a great deal about your customer, do not go visit them until you do. Research your account thoroughly; use lower-level employees and colleagues to help you get ready. For most large organizations, there is a wealth of information readily available on the Web as well.
7. **Have materials ready:** Bring with you relevant examples, data, case studies, and white papers to support your claims. Printing is a visual business—take advantage of high impact visuals, and use them wherever they are appropriate.
8. **Limit PowerPoint slides:** Most executives will appreciate a conversation, and a minimum of presentation slides. They will be interested in getting to the opportunities and issues you can address.
9. **Limit the attendees:** It is best to go alone, or with one of your company's executives. The less people involved the more detailed and productive the meeting will be.
10. **If appropriate, work with the agency:** It is often the case that the agency(s) has the most influence on campaigns and graphic communication strategy. If an agency is currently influencing printing requirements, work with them to develop the strategy, instead of trying to compete with them to get your ideas noticed.

Calling on executives and senior managers is often a daunting task for printing salespeople. The advantage is that when you meet with senior managers, you will find that they are less concerned with cost and much more concerned with the value a new printing solution can bring to the company than the low and middle-level managers you may have dealt with in the past.

"These relationships are extremely important," according to Joe Truncale, president of NAPL. "Printers need to minimize their risks and debts, by taking control of their accounts, and expanding relationships with the people who truly create and control new and large printing initiatives."

Next time you start planning on going after new business—or increasing your relationship with current customers—keep these rules in mind, and you might be surprised at how it turns out.

Joe Rickard is a sales training leader and consultant who works with printing and technology companies in the graphic arts to improve their sales effectiveness. He is the founder of Intellectual Solutions LLC, a provider of customized sales and sales management training material and services. Contact Rickard at (845) 753-6156, email jrickard@intellectives.com, or visit www.intellectivesolutions.com.