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The Importance of Decision Makers in an Uncertain Economy

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Selling To Today's Real Decision-Makers

Salespeople have traditionally been advised to "sell to the decision-maker(s)", and while this may seem like common sense, the way in which B2B decision-making has evolved makes this advice more complicated (and more nuanced) than it might at first appear.

Whilst identifying and engaging a single final decision-maker may be relatively easy in some (not all) simple, low-value transactional sales, most high-value significant purchases involve multiple stakeholders, all of whom have an influence in the decision process - and the latest research suggests that this number is growing.

When the ground-breaking "Challenger Customer" was first published in 2015, it reported that the average size of the stakeholder group was 5.4. Subsequent research by Gartner and others has progressively increased this average number to 10 or more. Some particularly complex situations involve even more stakeholders.

Why is this? Why is it no longer enough to base our sales strategies on "selling to the C-level"? That particular strategy may have sold a lot of books by authors who published creative variations on that particular theme, but I was never persuaded that it was ever a universally effective approach, and I'm absolutely convinced of that now.

Imposing a top-down C-level decision without the support of those who are going to have to implement it is a recipe for failure, as the many organisations who tried it have come to realise. In enlightened customers, important decisions are made by consensus.

Of course, senior executives will have their say. They retain the power to veto proposed purchases that they are unconvinced of - but it would take a very brave (or foolhardy) senior executive to move forward without the support of the other stakeholders.

This has important consequences. If we want to drive a potential sale to a positive conclusion (and emerge with a satisfied, loyal, and lastingly profitable customer at the other end), we're going to have to influence a significant number of people - and wherever any potential disruption is involved, we're probably going to need to promote the benefits of change before we seek to persuade the stakeholders of the unique benefits of our approach.

How can we start to identify the relevant stakeholders? We can begin by identifying the people in the roles that have been involved in previous similar positive buying decisions and add to that the people in the roles who are most likely to be affected by the issues our prospect is trying to address.

We can't afford to ignore all the potential gatekeepers - such as procurement, legal, IT security, compliance and so on. And we need to very carefully assess whether our current prime contact has a track record of success in navigating similar decisions through the system - and whether they even understand how buying decisions are actually made in their organisation.

This is a bigger issue than many salespeople often recognise. It's all too easy to develop a false sense of confidence because we are engaged with an apparently positive "champion". But how is that champion perceived by their colleagues? Are they seen as a safe and trusted pair of hands? Do they have a track record of success in bringing similar projects to a positive conclusion?

Does our so-called "champion" even really know how decisions are actually made and executed within their own organisation? Unfortunately for many salespeople, the answer is a resounding "no" - and that's one reason why being single- or narrowly-threaded is such a dangerous sales approach.

Even if our champion proves to be both influential and competent, they will almost always benefit from our experience of successfully navigating similar consensus-based decision-making processes through similar organisations.

Once we have identified the key potential stakeholders and decision-makers, we then need to influence their thinking. We need to understand what's really important to them as individuals as well as what's important to the organisation as a whole - and we need to understand their concern that they may end up making the wrong decision that fails to achieve its declared objectives.

Whenever any significant level of perceived risk is involved, it's often easier for organisations and key stakeholders to simply stick with the status quo. They are less likely to be blamed for doing nothing than they are for being associated with a flawed decision to change.

Matt Dixon (of "Challenger Sale" fame) and Ted McKenna explain why in their excellent recent book "The JOLT effect: How High Performers Overcome Customer Indecision". They point out that as the point-of-decision comes closer, decision-makers are less driven by the Fear of Missing Out [FOMO] than they are by the Fear of Messing Up [FOMO].

In a consensus-driven world, individual stakeholders seek to avoid sticking their necks out to support a decision that could potentially backfire on them. They don't want to be associated with a failed change initiative. They would rather "do nothing" instead.

That's why - towards the conclusion of our prospect's buying journey - we need to engage with each of the decision-makers and ensure that they are comfortable with the decision we are asking them to make. As the authors point out, we need to judge their level of indecision, offer our recommendations, limit their exploration of options, and take risk off the table.

If we can do this, we deserve to get their decision. If we can't, we don't. It's as simple as that. ■

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