



The Art of Selling With Executive Sponsors

Why sales teams should consider involving non-sales senior leaders in the selling process.

Gone are the days when selling was the preserve of sales professionals. As the mantra goes, now **everyone's in sales**. Considering how challenging the B2B game has become, this means no star players should be left on the bench. Indeed, a tactic known to provide great leverage to sales teams is executive sponsorship, or the art of tapping C-suite executives and other non-sales senior leaders in the pursuit of large, complex B2B deals.

The networks and knowledge of such leaders can be invaluable for developing relationships and better understanding clients' needs. What's more, these high-level executives have the luxury of not being labelled "salespeople". This means that they can engage with customers in a different way, even if their ultimate objective is the same – winning the deal.

Good sponsors provide a fresh and sometimes even provocative perspective. They are often better able to put themselves in the customer's shoes. If your customer is a marketer, involving your own head of marketing could become a competitive advantage. I saw this tactic deployed successfully in a software company where the salesperson recruited executive sponsors from IT and customer service, mirroring the buyer's most critical stakeholder groups. With the help of these executive sponsors, the sales team built stronger relationships with the different internal customers and crafted the best proposal.

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However, such an exact mirroring strategy is not required. For example, your company's head of investor relations or chief legal counsel could be your sales team's secret weapon. Or a marketing, finance or HR leader could be the best person for the job. What is clear, however, is that these executive sponsors can mean the difference between winning and losing an account.

Here are four tips that I have found helpful when leveraging the assistance of senior leaders.

1. Do it for the right reasons and don't choose just anyone.

Salespeople are often under a lot of pressure to make progress in the sales cycle. This can tempt them to involve leaders for the wrong reasons:

- "If I involve a senior leader, it will show that I am making progress."
- "I am desperate to change the game. I'd better involve a senior leader."
- "The client has asked me to bring someone senior along. I'd better do it."

The reasons for involving a senior leader must be legitimate, clear and well-thought-through. You first need to assess the situation and determine what kind of intervention will help.

Your approach should be linked to your overall strategy. For example, you may have realised that your company's HR leader is connected to your prospect's HR director, a senior decision maker whose sign-off you need to win the project. This is a prime opportunity to leverage your HR leader's peer-to-peer relationship and improve your chances of winning. Executive sponsorship is a highly effective way for you to fill in the senior gaps of your stakeholder map.

2. Give your sponsor a meaningful and ongoing role.

Too often salespeople think that they just need a "warm body with a title" to attend their sales meeting. Customers are rarely impressed by your ability to persuade someone senior to join a meeting. It's a pretty insignificant investment of time, even for a CEO. Your executive sponsor needs to add a visible benefit.

Even in situations where you're only looking for ceremonial involvement, such as a meet-and-greet exercise, make it specific, meaningful and impactful. Link this ceremonial interaction to a sales meeting that has just taken place. For example, after the usual pleasantries and small talk, your sponsor could confirm their understanding of the customer's situation and challenges in a few words. This will show how clued-in the sponsor is. Your sponsor could take advantage of their seniority and "distance" from the details to ask direct questions. For example, if you're not sure who the ultimate decision maker is, the sponsor could weave that question into the exchange. Or the sponsor could try to find out who the major competitors are on the deal.

To have the greatest impact, a sponsor's involvement should include various touchpoints over time, making the connections more authentic. Asking your leader to become the account sponsor is a good way to encourage ongoing involvement. You can involve them in internal account strategy and planning meetings (from time to time) so they become gradually more aware of the client, its challenges and how your company is solving them. To make your sponsor's role meaningful, ask them to develop a personal relationship with one of the buyer's senior decision makers. Sponsors shouldn't wait until there's a live deal to make the connection. Executive relationships are forged more easily when there isn't a direct commercial benefit to be realised.

3. Make sure your sponsor is briefed and coached.

There's nothing more embarrassing than a sales meeting where your sponsor shows signs of

ignorance, whether regarding the client, their industry, their challenges or the solution you are proposing. These signs surface quickly if you're not careful. And once they do, it's difficult to recover. Spare yourself and your sponsor embarrassment by briefing them properly. This could be as simple as sending them an email with an overview or having a short coffee chat before the sales call. It could also be more comprehensive:

- Client fact packs are a great way to get executives up to speed on your account. Fact packs are succinct research reports on the customers, their industry, their challenges, etc.
- Share your account strategy with your executive sponsor.
- Write a sales call plan.
- Send your sponsor a link to the account on your CRM system (if they have access!).
- Hold a conference call a week ahead and ask your sponsor to prepare questions.

Most importantly, make sure your sponsor knows what you want to achieve and the role you hope for them to play. For example, very early in the sales cycle, you may have some basic insights on the client, but now want to know what keeps the client's CEO up at night. This would help you better tailor your approach. Uncovering your prospect's most pressing business needs is a great mission for your sponsor as they are removed from the sales process and can engage on a different level.

4. Give and receive feedback.

Providing thoughtful feedback to your sponsor has many benefits. First, it demonstrates that you are investing in the sponsor's involvement. Second, the sponsor might learn something about sales. Remember, everyone's in sales! Third, your feedback can also define the next steps you expect the sponsor to take. Finally, ask your sponsor for feedback on your own performance. You never know what you might learn.

One additional tip for senior leaders

For sponsors, do not take on the responsibility of a strategic account lightly. It takes time to become an effective executive sponsor, so it's best to focus your efforts on only one or two accounts.

In sports, the coach's ability to make effective substitutions and ensure the right team is on the field is key to securing the win. The same is true in high-stakes B2B deals. Senior executives can make a real difference. The more prepared the sales team is, including the executive sponsor, the more the sales process is likely to be successful. Find out who are your hidden star players and don't leave them

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