



5 Essential Strategies for Highly Effective Initial Meetings

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Introduction

Reaching corporate decision makers is really tough these days. They rarely answer the phone, roll all calls to voicemail and seldom call you back. You may think that their behavior is rude. But the truth is, these busy people are contacted by dozens of sellers every single day – all requesting a spot on their already overcrowded calendar.

When you do set up a meeting with a corporate decision maker, it's imperative to make the best use of this hard-earned "window of opportunity." Whether you have 15 minutes for a phone conversation or 30 minutes for an online presentation, your prospects must feel that their time with you was well spent.

During and after the meeting, they should feel that you truly understand their business needs, genuinely want to make a difference and are a credible resource. When prospects feel that way about you, they want to:

- Learn more about how your offering impacts their business.
- Involve others in their company in learning more.
- Explore and evaluate the potential ROI in making a change.

Get the picture? The key to your success is to make that first meeting so engaging that your prospect finds the concept of working with you/your company to be virtually irresistible.

In this ebook, you'll learn five essential strategies to create those highly effective initial meetings that ultimately lead to sales success.

Strategy I: Ditch the Pitch

If you're like most sellers, the less time you have with prospective customers, the more information you feel compelled to share during the meeting. After all, you've been waiting for weeks or even months for a chance to talk to these decision makers. If you don't cover every single detail about your company and your offering, you may never have another chance.

That's why so many initial meetings start with the obligatory overview that typically includes:



Company History



Office Locations



Client List

Many sellers feel that it's essential for their prospects to know this information about their organization right up front. They also feel that it positions their company as a bona fide competitor in their market space.

They're wrong. This sales-derailing mistake causes corporate decision makers to start thinking, "Another self-serving salesperson. How soon can I end this meeting?" They start disengaging from the seller, who is often so busy talking that the prospects' disinterest goes unnoticed.

The Pitch Continues

Next up in their one-way sales diatribe? Most likely an overview of the solutions their company provides, complete with marketing verbiage designed to convey that their offering is “the best:”

- Leading-edge products/services
- State-of-the-art methodologies
- Solutions for all your business needs
- Robust, innovative systems
- Scalability & upgradeability
- Unique, proprietary capabilities



After that, they describe their key differentiators with such self-promoting puffery as:

- Market leader
- Quality service
- Strong partnership
- One-stop shopping
- Passionate about the business
- Cost-effective solutions

At this point, most sellers launch into a more detailed explanation of their entire product or service offering. However, their prospects have had enough. It's "objection" time!

How Prospects React

They have three perfectly gracious ways of bringing the meeting – and the potential business relationship – to a permanent closure. They ask or state:

- *“So how much does this product (service, solution) cost?”*

This can be a total showstopper for sellers who have blathered on and on about their offering. Without an understanding of needs, issues, goals and challenges, they're unable to articulate the business value – and any price they quote seems way too high.

- *“Can it do (fill in the blank)? No? That's important to us.”*

Because prospects are so busy, they're often looking for reasons to rule you out. Even minor, insignificant details can be used as objections and derail your sales initiatives.

- *“That’s really interesting (unique, incredible). I bet you sell a lot.”*

When sellers get this response, decision makers are dismissing them in the kindest of ways. However, they’ve omitted the final part of the sentence, “But not here.”

Clearly these aren’t the responses you or any seller wants to hear. But they’re the logical outcomes of a one-way presentation focused on your company and your product, service or solution. To have a highly effective first meeting, it’s imperative for you to “ditch the pitch.”



Strategy 2: Flip Your Focus

As I've already shown, effective first meetings aren't about you or your company. Instead, you need to flip the focus so that it's all about what's important to your prospective customer.

Think RELEVANCE! That's what your prospects are really interested in.

From the moment you start talking, they start assessing the relevance of what you're saying or presenting. Company history? Irrelevant. Detailed product specs? Irrelevant. Your awards? Irrelevant.

For prospects who haven't yet decided to change from the status quo, all your competitive differentiators are totally irrelevant – even though you think it's vitally important to share every gory detail. Prospects couldn't care less how you compare to Company B or Company C, since they're not seriously considering other options.

In fact, 95% of your initial meetings are with people who are reasonably satisfied with the status quo. Things may not be perfect, but they're certainly tolerable.

So what could possibly be relevant to these potential customers who have no intention of making a change? Let me net it out:

*Decision makers are always interested in ideas, insights
and information that helps them eliminate problems,
address issues and achieve their objectives.*

How to Increase Your Relevance

You can't be relevant to customers until you truly understand their business. Yet I find that many sellers have minimal knowledge about the prospect's status quo, its limitations and the resulting impact on the prospect's business. Nor do they know what their prospects are responsible for or how their performance is measured.



To increase your relevance, here's what you need to do:

- Interview your existing customers to learn more about their roles, responsibilities, objectives, strategic initiatives and business challenges.
- Interview recent customers to identify the business value they've realized as a result of switching to your product, service or solution.

From your interviews, you'll learn what's important to them in the long term and short term. Depending on their positions in the company, your prospects are likely struggling with issues such as declining profitability, slow turnaround or high supply chain costs. They may be expected to increase market share, improve their average order size or slash labor costs.

What's relevant is BUSINESS, not your products, services or solutions. Your offering is simply a tool that helps companies achieve their business objectives.

Impact on Initial Client Meeting

Now that you know what's relevant, here's what you need to focus on in your first client meeting.

- **Purpose:** Rather than focusing on your company, the reason for the meeting is to discuss a specific business issue or objective your prospect is concerned about. For example, you might say:

“Mr. Prospect, as I mentioned when we set up this meeting, we help salespeople crack into corporate accounts, speed up their sales cycle and win bigger contracts. It’s a real challenge for most sellers these days – and a costly one too. I’d like to give you a little background on this – and then see if it makes sense to continue the discussion.”

By doing this, you assure your prospects that you won’t waste their time by blabbering on about your company or your product. It signals that that meeting is all about the prospects’ needs and solving the challenges they’re facing.

- **Meeting Objective:** Instead of giving information about your company’s history, offerings and offices, it’s all about the business issue, the cost of staying with the status quo, and the value your customers have realized from switching.

For example, I start meetings by saying that the objective for the meeting is to “Help Generic Systems grow their sales in a turbulent economy.” CEOs and VPs of Sales immediately take notice and pay rapt attention.

You’ll get the same reaction from your prospects. Just start the meeting or presentation by stating a business objective they’re expected to achieve in the upcoming year. Next, address the key challenges that make it difficult to achieve that objective. Then, share a success story that highlights the results you helped another customer achieve.

If you're doing a presentation, your beginning slides should be:



Meeting Objective



Key Challenges



Customer Stories

Once you've hooked the decision maker, you can elaborate on how you work with customers as well as specifics about your offering. But don't start there or you'll create obstacles.

The key to a successful initial meeting is to make sure that prospective customers understand the business impact and value of your offering right away. This is critical for your ultimate sales success.

Strategy 3: Create Conversations

One-way presentations – where you’re doing the bulk of the talking, explaining and presenting – are deadly, but all too common. Why? Again, it’s that overwhelming desire to make sure your prospects know everything about your company, product, service or solution because this is your *one big chance* make a positive impression. But if you succumb to the “itch to pitch,” you’re making a big mistake.

Instead, focus on leading a business-focused discussion in your first meeting – even if you’re doing an online presentation or demonstration. This enables you to:

- Establish a relationship with the decision maker.
- Learn more about their business.
- Show your commitment to making a difference, not just a sale.

Very few sellers plan their questions ahead of time, and that’s their downfall. The human brain is incapable of being a good listener when it’s also trying to figure out what to say, do or ask next. Literally. It can only handle one of these tasks at a time.

To increase your initial meeting effectiveness, it’s essential to write down ten key questions prior to your first meeting. What makes a good question? It depends on where your prospects are in their decision cycle.

Questions Are the Answer

If the decision makers you're talking to haven't decided to spend money on your offering, then your questions need to focus on:

How they're currently addressing their needs.

- Their primary objectives for the upcoming year.
- Current/planned initiatives to achieve objectives.
- Issues and challenges potentially impacting goal achievement.
- Trends, business direction and priorities.

If there's already money in the budget and your prospect is evaluating options, then focus your questions on:

- Results they're hoping to achieve from the change initiative.
- Key criteria they're using to evaluate alternatives and their relative importance.
- Their perspective regarding your offerings' comparative strengths and weaknesses.

Engagement Is Key

If you're using a PowerPoint presentation, plan questions to engage your prospect with each slide. Get them talking, sharing, and involved with you. If you're giving an online demonstration, plan questions to engage your prospect in all the major things you're showing. Research shows that sellers who ask insightful questions are perceived as more credible, more intelligent, and more caring. Rather than just hoping good questions pop into your mind in the heat of the sale (they won't!), be proactive. When you prepare questions prior to your meeting and lead the conversation, you'll significantly enhance your sales success.

Strategy 4: Build Credibility

Busy decision makers want to work with smart, savvy people who have a depth of understanding about their business. They don't want to waste one second of their precious time with a "jack of all trades" who doesn't specialize in what they need and who must be educated in order to provide value. As such, they rapidly make judgments about your company's credibility in the marketplace as well as your personal credibility.

Despite the shortness of your initial meeting, you can do many things to increase your personal credibility quotient.

- **Highlight Your Pre-call Research:** When prospects know that you've invested time in understanding their business prior to the meeting, your credibility immediately rises. Make sure to mention any relevant tidbits of information you uncovered.

"Terry, in preparing for today's meeting, I spent quite a bit of time on your website reviewing your service offerings, market focus and marketing collateral. Additionally, I read your annual report and signed up for your company's newsletter."

- **Wrap Your Questions:** As has already been mentioned, just asking questions increases your credibility. But when you wrap your questions with your knowledge and expertise, then it skyrockets.

"As I mentioned, our company is focused on the small and emerging business marketplace. We typically work with entrepreneurs to help them crack into corporate accounts and win big contracts. One of the biggest issues we keep hearing from these executives is that it's extremely difficult to penetrate big companies when you're a no-name firm. How big of an issue is this for your salespeople?"

- **Speak the Language of Business:** When your prospect hears you talking about business instead of your product, services or solutions, you strengthen your position as a credible resource.

“Most executives we’re talking to are really concerned with the success of their new product launches – especially with the economy in turmoil. Specifically, one of the key metrics they’re focused on is what they can do to shorten time-to-revenue as well as maximize sales force productivity.”



- **Talk about Similar Situations:** The more experience prospects know that you've had with other comparable companies, the better it is for your credibility.

"We recently worked with another firm that, similar to your organization, had targeted large pharmaceuticals as their prime prospects. As you might expect, these companies all had a significant investment in their technology infrastructure – and weren't about to throw it out any time soon.

"After analyzing their capabilities, we come up with a strategy that enabled them to get an initial project in these accounts, prove their value and expand their footprint from there."

Before your initial meeting with prospective customers, think about the numerous ways you can gently – without bragging – insert statements or questions that enhance your credibility. Without planning, there's a good chance you'll miss the opportunity to subtly, but competently, stand out from the crowd.

Strategy 5: Effortlessly Advance

The final way to build credibility and increase your initial meeting's effectiveness is for you to suggest a logical next step. Rather than asking your prospects how they'd like to proceed, make a recommendation.

Based on my experience, here are some common ways to effortlessly advance your sales process.

- **Follow-up Meetings:** Often, because of time constraints, there is still much more to be explored and discussed with your initial contact. It's likely you'll need some time to think about what you've learned and come back with ideas or more questions.
- **Meetings with Others in Their Company:** Most corporate decisions involve multiple people. Depending on what you sell and who is interested in it, you might suggest meetings with your contact's boss, colleagues, direct reports, financial executives or technology evaluators.
- **Meetings with Your Colleagues:** Other people in your own company can bring significant value to the sales process. A logical next step might be a meeting with your executive team, industry specialists or technical experts.
- **Meetings with Your Customers:** Sometimes the logical next step is for you to arrange a conversation with one of your customers who faced a similar situation. These outside "testimonials" can have a major impact on your sales success.

What matters most is that you know what the logical next step is and then propose it. In most cases, closing for the order after one meeting is premature and only creates obstacles. Your goal, after the initial meeting is to keep the process moving, one step at a time, to its natural conclusion.

When you suggest “what’s next,” you demonstrate to your prospect that you’ve done this before, that you know it takes multiple meetings and you respect the process.



Conclusion

The initial client meeting has the potential to make or break your future relationship with a prospect. If you go into the meeting intent on sharing everything about your company and your offering, the meeting has a good chance of failing.

Your prospects will feel like they're listening to a self-serving salesperson who is more interested in getting the sale than making a difference for their business. When that happens, they'll look for the quickest way to show you the door.

If you come to the meeting focused on the their goals and the challenges they may face in achieving them, you'll be perceived in an entirely different light. You'll capture their attention, engage them in business-focused conversations, share ideas and insights that can positively impact their business and effortlessly advance to the appropriate next step.

Decision makers may be extremely busy today, but they always have time for sellers who bring value.

About Jill Konrath



A leading-edge sales strategist and author of the bestselling book, *Selling to Big Companies* – which was recently selected as a *Fortune* “must read” – Jill is an in-demand sales speaker who helps sellers crack into corporate accounts and win big contracts.

Jill frequently receives emails such as this:

“Thank you for articulating the sales process in such a fantastic way. It’s really helped me to enlighten our prospects as to what we can do for them and why they should do it! **This has translated into 14 new clients in 6 weeks with projects ranging from \$50,000 to well over \$1,000,000.**”

Or this: “Using your strategies, I called the CFO and left a value proposition focused voicemail. **The next day, the Operations Vice President called me!** This process took 90 more days to complete, but **last week we won a verbal commitment for \$5M in business** plus there’s potential for \$10M more next year.”

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