A Plan for Reaching C-level Decision-Makers

Research suggests buyers are engaging later in the journey and there are more members in the team. This means C-level is better informed than ever before, and able to make quicker decisions after engaging with potential suppliers.

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So how do you get through to these busy decision-makers and persuade them to buy?

The suspect-to-sales process is the same as it's always been, what's changed is the Information, Collateral, Route and Metrics.

To better understand the triggers in the buying process (and when to shoot), it's useful to look at the buyers' view of the journey.

Diagram I shows the path from Suspect to Sales (sellers' view), and Consider to Purchase (buyers' view). At each stage the buyer will have different questions and thoughts; at the Investigate stage they will ask "what can satisfy my need?", at the Evaluate stage their thoughts are "who can satisfy my need?".

Diagram I - The Buyers' view of the sales process



Knowing where the buyer is in this process enables you to deliver a more relevant message and content. Nowhere is this more important than when dealing with CEOs, CMOs, CIOs and their board-level colleagues. Your 'elevator pitch' needs to be concise, informative, relevant and persuasive.

This White Paper will discuss how to plan and reach C-level prospective customers, and how to ensure the all-important first telephone call is a success.

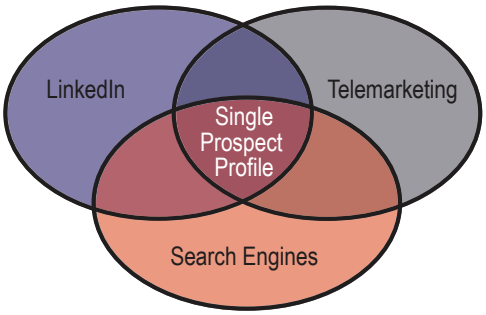
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1. Information

The first stage in the process is to gather as much information as possible about your C-level target(s), their buying team and the company/product. You cannot afford to have an uninformed conversation with senior decision-makers.

We believe there are 3 valuable sources of information; Search Engines, LinkedIn and your own telemarketing activity. Combined, these will give you a 'single prospect profile' and enable you to deliver a more relevant, and therefore persuasive, message.

Diagram II - Single Prospect Profile



LinkedIn will give you information on the individuals, Search Engines highlight company news and competitors, but your own telemarketing activity is perhaps the most revealing.

Telemarketing research (talking to junior executives and department managers) is likely to give you information that has not yet been published, and can also help you understand the dynamics of the buying team.

"Telemarketing research is likely to give you information that has not yet been published, and can also help you understand the dynamics of the buying team"

This prepares you for your C-level conversation, and means you don't waste time 'fact finding' during your call with executives on the Board.

Another part of the information phase is to understand the typical characteristics of a senior decision-maker. This will help you understand how to pitch your proposition. Here's a few from a list on page 8 of this White Paper.

They have changing priorities. They can go cold after expressing interest. Do you have a nurturing programme?

They have a busy work-ethic. They never switch-off. Test the timing of your calls and emails. Early mornings or early evenings?

They rely on others and collaborate. They seldom make decisions on their own - often asking for feedback from peers and research from subordinates. The C-suite is a collective, know their names.

They spend a lot of time in meetings. Note regular meeting times and avoid them.

They're mobile. Smart phones and tablets are essential tools for C-suite execs. Ensure you're marketing is not just mobile compatible, but mobile optimised.

Doing a little bit of homework and preparation at this stage pays dividends later.

2. Collateral

Collateral is all the online and offline material you will need to support your proposition. It's more than content marketing (blogs, white papers, webinars, etc) and includes tools such as company brochures and even free samples or trials.

It's important to deliver material and information at the right stage in the process. Sending a product sheet at the prospect stage is too early and could be disregarded, sending a white paper at the opportunity stage may be seen as irrelevant (or worse, the decision-maker might decide to re-investigate and go back to the prospect stage).

Diagram III - Delivering the right content at the right time



> Good content can help position 'unknown' brands as experts with C-levels, making subsequent sales calls a lot easier

As well as the timing of delivery, you should also consider the design and information provided in each piece of content.

For example, a white paper should be neutral in tone as the reader will be asking 'what' can satisfy my need - it's too early to discuss 'who'. The design should also be neutral with limited use of your logo and no obvious sales pitch.

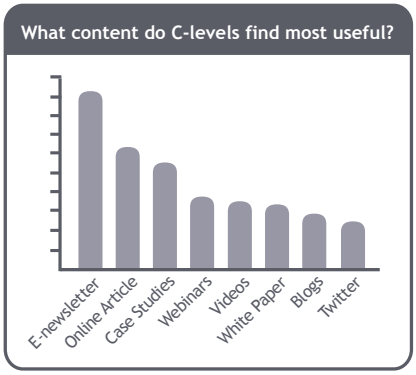
Company brochures may be introduced at the opportunity stage. They could be a synopsis of your unique selling proposition (USP), and used to demonstrate you are a company of substance. But don't expect busy executives to read anything more than 12 pages.

A problem often encountered by brands in new markets is that senior executives are reluctant to take their calls. Good content can help position 'unknown' brands as experts with C-levels, making subsequent sales calls a lot easier.

The next question is what type of information do C-level executives find useful? The answer is in Chart I opposite. Note how white papers (like this) are not at the top of their list. This is because white papers are digested at the prospect stage, before senior management get fully involved (more about that in the next section).

Also note, the internet and Web 2.0 means buyers have better product knowledge than ever before. It's easy for them to Google your company or product. So make sure you tell them something they don't already know. Original research about their market sector can open doors.

Chart I - Most useful content



Source: SCi Sales Group, 2013 n = 200

> If you go straight to C-level, without doing your homework, you will fail.
> And their gatekeeper will ensure you don't get a second chance

Chris Clarkson
Account Manager
SCi Sales Group

3. Route

SCi also believe there are now two entry points on the suspect-to-sale journey. The first is when a C-level exec decides the company has a need or want. For example, when a firm decides it needs to find better laptops for its sales executives.

In this scenario, the company's buying team will enter at the suspect stage. We call this a '**proactive search**'.

But what if the company doesn't know of a products existence? New inventions and disruptive technology are constantly entering the marketplace, and may not yet be visible on a search engine.

For example, you might get a sales call announcing the launch of a new technology that reduces energy bills by 50%. You were not actively looking to reduce your energy bills and did not know of the existence of this technology. We call that a '**reactive find**'.

On a reactive find buyers do not go through the Consider or Investigate stages, because there may not be a comparable product. They move straight to the Lead stage.

It's important to recognise there are many routes to a sale or purchase, and your marketing (collateral and content) needs to accomodate every path.

Diagram IV - Reactive Find and Proactive Search, plus key stages by Job Title



Buying teams are often divided into Junior, Intermediate and Higher management executives. As you can see from Diagram IV, the stage at which they become involved with the buying process may depend on their seniority.

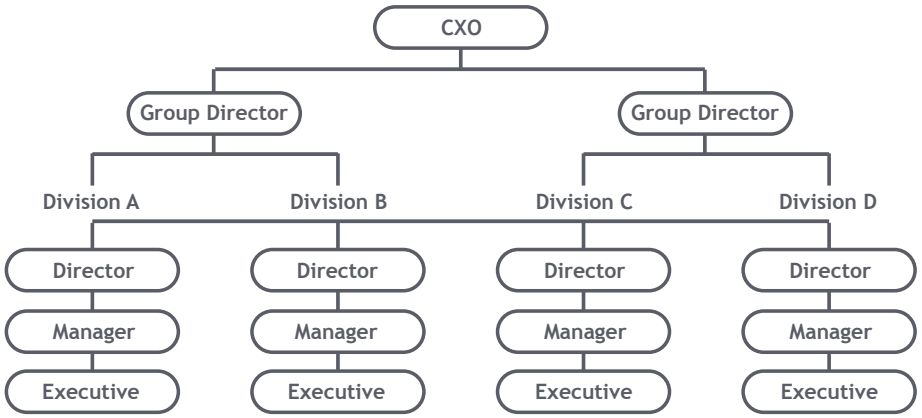
The process outlined in Diagram IV can benefit your sales team. Talking with Junior/Intermediate executives gives them an opportunity to gather sales intelligence, as well as practice their elevator pitch before engaging with higher management.

Chris Clarkson, Account Manager at SCi Sales Group, supports the view that subordinate managers play a vital role in modern selling, “If you go straight to C-level, without doing your homework, you will fail. And their gatekeeper will ensure you don’t get a second chance.”

Chris also highlighted that C-level is not necessarily the holy grail in selling, “Not all buying decisions are made at C-level. There is a hierarchy of support executives, each with budget responsibility. Do your homework and connect with the right person.”

It can take up to 3-6 months to have a conversation at C-level, so it’s frustrating to find the purchasing decision is further down the chain of command. Working from Ground-Level:Up can be more effective than Top-Level:Down.

Diagram V - Typical Company Organisation



Yet it’s also important to not waste time with junior executives who over-inflate their purchasing power. Rigorous BANT qualification is essential. That’s why talking with other executives in the buying team can often reveal where the real power lies.

On the journey to the Boardroom you will inevitably encounter gatekeepers. There is a skill in getting past these guardians of C-level executives, and there have been many books written on the subject.

We don’t have the space in this White Paper to go through all the methods we use to circumvent gatekeepers, but there is a list of 10 tips on page 9 of this White Paper.

> “Not all buying decisions are made at C-level. There is a hierarchy of support executives, each with budget responsibility”

Chris Clarkson
Account Manager
SCi Sales Group

4. Metrics

The internet ensures decision-makers are now better informed than ever before. The Web, including 2.0, has changed everything; 57% of the buyers' journey has been completed before they contact a new supplier**.

> "The Web, including 2.0, has changed everything; 57% of the buyers' journey has been completed before they contact a new supplier"

Yet conversely, in this digital age, human interaction (HI) remains important - 68% of B2B sales involve some form of HI, either a phone call or a meeting.

The average order value with HI is £68,032; without HI it drops to just £1,018. So, for those big purchasing decisions that involve C-level executives, you have to do more than just Tweet and send an email.

But how many calls does it take to get an appointment with board-level members? Truth is, it varies. Table I is a snap-shot of the range from some recent campaigns.

Table I - How many calls to get a senior management opportunity?

Calls/Minutes to achieve Opportunity

	Calls per Opp	Mins per Opp
Finance Outsourcing	162	184
Managed IT Services	254	400
Industrial Utility Supply	37	23

Across a sample of 29,277 calls we calculated it takes 80 calls on average to get a single opportunity.

Source: SCi Sales Group, 2011

80
calls on average to generate one opportunity*.

But don't despair. Our research also indicates that higher management can be surprisingly receptive to the right type of calls. Chart II shows clearly they are less likely to reject sales calls than their Intermediate or Junior colleagues.

This may be because as the key strategists for the business they need to be informed of all available options. It could also be their calls are better screened by gatekeepers, as a result they know the call has already been filtered.

68%
of B2B sales involve human interaction (HI)*.

Chart II - How many calls do C-levels reject?



76% of Junior Executives rejected all of their last 3 sales calls, yet only 47% of Higher Executives rejected all 3.

£68k
is the average order value with HI*.
Without HI it drops to £1,018.

Source: SCi Sales Group, 2013 n = 200

* Source: SCi Sales Group ** Source: CEB Report, 2012

5. Conclusion

Beside the universal problem of getting past the gatekeeper, there are specific challenges when trying to contact C-level executives.

Our best analogy is to view it as a ride in a lift or elevator.

> First, find the floor you need. The journey should be ground floor up.
> Practice your elevator pitch, making sure you educate people as you travel.
> Finally, exit at the right level... C-level is not the only stop.

"The journey should be ground floor up. Practice your elevator pitch, making sure you educate people as you travel. Finally, exit at the right level"

Find the floor you need
Gather as much information as possible before you begin your journey. Know where you are heading. Build a 'single prospect profile'.

The journey should be ground floor up
Talk to everyone in the buying team, not just senior executives. Subordinates can be a great source of unpublished information.

Practice your elevator pitch
Use the junior and intermediate executives to practice your elevator pitch. When you arrive at C-level, you need to be well-rehearsed and concise.

Educate people as you travel up
Buyers have better product knowledge than ever before. The internet and Web 2.0 makes it easy for them to research. So tell them something they don't already know.

Ensure you exit at the right level
C-level is not the only stop. As part of BANT qualification, make sure you know where the real purchasing power lies - it may be the floor below C-level.

Want to learn more? Join the discussion on LinkedIn, go to http://bit.ly/SCiClevel or scan the QR Code below. You can also share an infographic based on this White Paper with your colleagues, simply visit the short-link http://bit.ly/SCiInfo7.

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6. Appendices

Appendix I - Characteristics of a C-level executive

1. They're paid to improve results
Give them facts and figures. How much will your product improve their results?

2. They have changing priorities
They can go cold after expressing interest. Do you have a nurturing programme?

3. They have a busy work-ethic
They never switch-off. Test the timing of your calls and emails. Early mornings or early evenings? Be concise, informative and relevant.

4. They rely on others and collaborate.
They seldom make decisions on their own - often asking for feedback from peers and research from subordinates. The C-suite is a collective, know their names.

5. They don't like to make mistakes
Major mistakes affect an executive's reputation and damage the company. Can you reduce the risk factor?

6. They have big egos
Don't back-down when you're challenged. Believe in what you do, be knowledgeable and confident.

7. They spend a lot of time in meetings
Note regular meeting times and avoid them.

8. They receive up to 150 emails every day
Don't rely just on email or any single marketing tool; multi-channel is the key. 68% of B2B sales involve human interaction, either a phone call or a meeting.

9. They are 'big picture' thinkers
Most C-levels don't deal with the little details — they pay others to do that job. Focus on the big picture of your prospect's organisation.

10. They will know about your company
If they don't know you now, they can quickly gather information about you online - good and bad. Be prepared to address uncomfortable questions.

11. They're changing roles and positions faster
Forbes magazine claims C-level tenure is now less than four years. Contact verification is important. Our research shows LinkedIn is 70% accurate.

12. They're mobile, mobile, mobile
Smart phones and tablets are essential tools for C-suite execs. So ensure you're marketing is not just mobile compatible, but mobile optimised.

13. They are human
Can marketing truly connect with buyers if we treat them as just 'data' or a 'digital footprint'? It's easy to lose sight of one enduring fact... C-level execs are people; always have been, always will be.

Appendix II - 10 tips for getting past the gatekeeper

1. Bin the script, build a plan
Gatekeepers are adept at hearing a scripted tone in your voice, which always sounds like a sales call. Instead, plan how you will approach them and what you might say depending upon the range of responses you could get.

2. If you have a contact name, be confident
Give the impression you are known to the contact. Adopt a firm but polite tone. It will give the impression of someone senior who they ought to help rather than hinder.

3. Avoid using your company name
By not using your company name you can give the impression it's a personal call.

4. Use a senior job title
Senior people, Directors or C-levels, are often transferred without being questioned by the gatekeeper.

5. Limit your answers, and don't fill in the gaps
Limit your answers to a simple Yes or No if possible. Asking questions expectantly, or feeling the need to talk if there is a pause in the conversation, are giveaways that it's a cold call.

6. Avoid closed questions
Don't ask closed questions. Open questions require more than one word answers, and enable you to build a brief relationship with the gatekeeper.

7. Get the gatekeeper on your side
Never be rude to a gatekeeper. If they persist in not letting you through, simply ask "If you were me, how would you approach Mr XYZ? What's the best way to get an audience?"

8. Don't pitch the gatekeeper
No matter what happens, don't pitch the gatekeeper. They are not the decision-maker, they don't have the authority to say "Yes" but can easily say "No".

9. Ask for the assistant
If you cannot get through to C-level, ask for a manager or assistant further down the chain of command. Use LinkedIn to get their name. Start at the bottom and get transferred up.

10. Call the wrong number
If all else fails, change some of the last digits to the switchboard number. You may be able to get through to someone. Then apologise and ask to be transferred to the person you want.