ENGAGE THE C-SUITE TO ELEVATE YOUR BRAND

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE



B2B Marketing

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INTRODUCTION:

1. Who is the c-suite?

While the demands of the c-suite can intimidate many marketers and sales people, these executives want to be reached out to. They need fresh ideas from outside their companies. And they want to get involved in the buying process when a problem or opportunity is first identified.

The c-suite operates both internally in the micro-environment of the organisation, and externally in the macro-environment of the marketplace and industry. Inside the company, the c-suite encompasses the people who do the thinking, not the doing. In fact, it's unlikely that they're even managing the 'doers'. Yet they have the accountability for driving the results. They are responsible for the outcomes but have to accomplish that by leading and setting strategy, vision and plans.

Internally they spend their time interacting with fellow c-suite executives. One thing that defines all c-suite executives is that they are not just leaders of their function but also business leaders. For example, a good CMO looks outside marketing to understand what the wider business needs are. Likewise, a good CFO shouldn't narrowly focus on just the finance, but what the wider implications are for the company's strategy and objectives. Ultimately, when working well together as a team, they get their fellow executives thinking about each other's areas as well. This way, they think bigger as a collective group, rather than just their area. That's why it's important for them to collaborate and communicate effectively with each other.

It's important to note that the c-suite is not a homogenous, generic group. They are individual people with different likes, dislikes and personalities.

Most c-suite executives became business leaders as a result of ambition. Desire to achieve something visible and noteworthy propels individual leaders and their companies to strive to reach their potential. Some CXOs have a much higher sense of drive and tenacity. In fact, some would call it an inner motor that pushes them to get to the heart of an issue and find solutions, drilling for specific answers and not giving up until they get them. Likewise, most business leaders have a high sense of self-confidence and self-reliance.

CXOs are also typically open to seeking diverse opinions in order to see and hear more, and factor a wider range of information into their decisions. They also tend to be realistic with a keen appetite for learning and seeking out new experiences. They are people too, and it pays to remember that when marketing to them.

2. Reaching the c-suite

Making first contact

Identify the target

One of the most critical steps is identifying the relevant executive at the right time. Business development professionals at large enterprises could be tracking hundreds of executives within companies, making it impossible to establish and maintain a personal relationship with each and every one of them at the same time.

However, there are tools available that scour the web for information and enable marketers to confound this limit by delivering insight at scale. Platforms and technologies like these will notify marketers about activity that is contextually important, ensuring they are ready to establish a relationship with an executive at the most opportune moment – for instance, should a particular organisation announce a merger or acquisition.

If you are targeting a particular executive based on the company's organisational chart, remember that sometimes the most appropriate target has the informal power to make crucial decisions, but isn't the formal decision-maker. For this reason, you should talk to people within the organisation to learn how decisions are made to identify the relevant executive.

Once you have identified the executive, there are four approaches that can be taken to gain access.

1. **The overt approach.** This traditionally starts with a letter to the executive and then a follow-up call.

2. **The referral approach.** Leveraging your network, find a source outside of the organisation that can make an introduction to the executive. Look to people in your company, consultants, business associates and friends. Be sure to prep your contact on what to say when introducing you, and arrange the introduction either by phone or in person – not email. This will get you past any gatekeepers and ensure your voicemail messages are returned.

3. **The sponsor approach.** Use a credible sponsor within the organisation to secure access to the executive.

4. **The gatekeeper approach.** Use an executive's personal assistant or right-hand person to gain access to the executive.

In most cases, B2B marketers don't have a contact within the client organisation, and so the most effective approach to 'sell to the top' is to build relationships from the bottom-up by engaging with the gatekeeper to gain access to the c-suite.

» The best strategy is to treat the gatekeeper as a sponsor, giving them all the right reasons to support you «

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Getting past the gatekeeper

In many organisations, getting calendar time with c-level executives can only be achieved through contact with their personal assistant or secretary. One of the biggest mistakes a B2B marketer can make is to fail to acknowledge the importance of the person who is assisting the executive during the relationship-building process. Marketers are often taught to get round this 'gatekeeper' in books and training manuals, when in fact the best strategy is to treat them as a sponsor, giving them all the right reasons to support you.

You should never attempt to circumvent the gatekeeper unless you are supremely confident that you will be able to obtain the meeting with the executive. If you fail in your attempts and are then bumped back down to the assistant, the relationship is already one built on mistrust. You should treat the gatekeeper as if they are the executive and fully explain your proposition. The best assistants will be fully conversant in their employer's business and will recognise your value, while the ones who aren't as well versed in their boss's issues may well pass you on as you sound impressive.

Be prepared

How you conduct yourself during the initial engagement is vitally important. Be prepared – assume the gatekeeper will block your path so that you can prepare and rehearse what to say if and when it happens.

If you reach a hard block, it is because the gatekeeper has not bought into you and/or what you're offering yet. It could be that they like what you're offering but doesn't think their boss will, or it may be that their boss would like your solution but they aren't convinced. Either way, ask what their concern is so that you can respond. If you are successful in obtaining support from the gatekeeper, be sure to keep them in the loop and copy them in on any future correspondence. When you come in for your first meeting ensure you meet the assistant and express your thanks. They will appreciate the fact that you have been professional, respectful of them and acknowledge the system. This relationship can serve you well in the long term.

Knowing when to walk away

Should you continue to fail to get past the gatekeeper, it may be prudent to acknowledge defeat and walk away. Estimates from companies whose sales cycles are nine months or more indicate that pursuing an opportunity can cost more than £100,000, whether you win or not. So if you have been stuck at the gatekeeper, there should come a time when you must consider shifting your attention to other opportunities where you have a greater chance of success.

3. Establishing a relationship

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Once you have secured an introduction to the executive, you will have a limited time to make an impact. C-level executives welcome fresh ideas from outside their organisation, but they only want to deal with people they trust – and they do not like being on the sharp end of a hard sell. Most of the time, CXOs are not ready to buy, and a pushy marketer will simply be an irritation.

To sell more successfully to the c-suite, professionals need to connect with them effectively so they can better identify relevant opportunities and issues. B2B marketers must draw on their relationship-building skills to progress the initial contact with the executive, leveraging customer insight that has been gathered to rapidly develop understanding and intimacy.

Appealing to the executive's behaviour type

Different types of people respond to different approaches. If you have done your background research, you will have learnt a little about the type of person the CXO is. But skilled B2B marketers will also be able to size up the executive quickly. Consider how you would approach the conversation according to different personality types:

Driver: Results-orientated, assertive, competitive and decisive. They will be ambitious, so an opportunity to raise their professional stature will appeal to them.

Analytical: Cautious, conventional, logical and precise. Ensures that everything is done by the book and that facts and information are presented in a logical manner.

Amiable: Relaxed, trusting, considerate and patient. They are often described as warm people but can also be described as 'wishy washy'.

Expressive: Enthusiastic, impulsive, dramatic, influential and confident. They might be excited about being in the media or on stage with a success story, so appeal to this motivation.

Understanding the executive's problems

The process of filtering the web and social media to gather customer insight and transform it into actionable intelligence should be ongoing for B2B marketers. Yet often marketers have not had the time or inclination to mine information about their prospects from sources in the public domain, such as news sources, LinkedIn, Twitter and the wider web. But with the advent of new tools, the benefits of this approach can now being realised.

For instance, when a director of a major telecommunications business delivers a presentation about his vision for the company, quite often this will subsequently appear on a

» Nothing will kill a burgeoning relationship quicker than if the executive believes you don't care «

conference and event website. Within this document you could find a wealth of information about their vision for the company and the problems and challenges the organisation faces. The information is often out there – you just need the technology to find, understand, rank and share this insight.

Armed with these insights you have the perfect platform to develop a meaningful relationship with the executive. Ensure that you demonstrate your understanding of their challenges, goals, vision, and so on – but also demonstrate a willingness to learn more. Nothing will kill a burgeoning relationship quicker than if the executive believes you don't care.

Remember, this is not a conversation about you or your products/services. The whole conversation is about the CXO and their initiative – what they want to achieve and your desire to help them. This is far more compelling than the bells and whistles of your products.

Demonstrating value

As the relationship develops you will need to demonstrate value. Again, drawing on the insight that you have collected, ensure you are fluent in the customer's industry and its associated jargon so that you can speak the language of the executive and relate in their terms. This also implies a deep understanding of their business.

Raise relevant questions and share insights and business perspectives that may be new to the executive. Your customer insight programme will once again pay off here, enabling you to share relevant resources, such as books, articles and blogs, that could be helpful to the CXO. You will also need the ability to tap into social media resources, such as a Twitter profile, influencer score, Facebook profile, and so on. This level of insight should be available on-demand, with the option to drill down to view historical components, including the ability to go back 30, 60, or 90 days.

In addition, if there are any people in your network able to support the executive's goals then put them in touch. You know you are clutching at straws if you are pitching too early in the conversation. The conversation should be about the customer. It is only when you reach a certain point in the discussion that you start to relate their challenge to the things that you can do to help with that challenge.

Ultimately, you must establish credibility – something that is a non-negotiable component of the relationship. This means you must demonstrate integrity and capability during the course of the relationship. But once achieved, you will be perceived as reliable and trustworthy, and have laid the foundations for a long-term relationship.

4. Six tips to engage the c-suite

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In an external environment, this group of people probably has their anti-marketing shields up higher than any other in the organisation. Everyone is trying to reach them to influence or sell to them. As a result, people in these roles are getting better at making themselves inaccessible by opting out, tuning out, and screening out. We live in a broad world of information abundance and attention scarcity. With so much information out there, it's hard to get anyone to pay attention, and CXOs are definitely the hardest. So, what can you do to create a dialogue with the c-suite?

1. Become a trusted source of information

These are business leaders and one of their defining attributes is an appetite for continuous learning. It's hard for an elite group of people to get trusted information externally because everyone is trying to get in front of them. For this reason, they tend to gravitate towards peer groups, which are seen as a trusted source of information. Generic communications from a vendor are no good – especially not to the c-suite. Communication to this group must be relevant, specific, and ideally supported by quantitative, time-based metrics, or it's simply too easy for them to tune out from the external 'noise' you're sending them.

2. Use educational content to engage

It's more important than ever for any communication to be relevant and specific. These individuals are looking for education, innovation and tangible gains, which is why content marketing, supported by relevant data and insight, is so important. Be specific, quantitative, and show time-based results metrics. Make sure you are speaking the same quantitative, revenue-related language that this elite group of people cares about.

» The essence of pull marketing to CXOs is offering relevant nuggets of information without sounding like a sales pitch «

3. Capture their imagination

The important issue for B2B marketers is that of relevance. If communications are not bespoke enough or are too vague in content, CXOs may ignore it completely. B2B marketers should look at their product or service to decide how and if it would capture the CXO's imagination before deciding how to publicise it. This also applies to social media; it may seem like a good idea to use Twitter to connect with a CXO target, but if the message is not going to resonate with them, all the effort to implement a social media strategy risks being disregarded or ignored entirely.

4. Talk problems and solutions

Although they are more accessible with the immediacy of social media, the c-suite are also vastly knowledgeable about their industry's issues, so communications that are projected and exchanged need to be well informed. As leaders at the core of a company, every decision they make affects the ROI and success of an organisation. Rather than talking about products and services, marketers need to present in terms of problems and solutions. CXOs won't be instantly engaged if marketers have an amazing product to promote, they just want to know how it fits with their organisation's issues and how their organisation can derive the most benefit from it in the shortest amount of time.

5. Keep it simple

The essence of pull marketing to CXOs is offering relevant nuggets of information without sounding like a sales pitch. By keeping language plain and free of unnecessary jargon, communications are more likely to be read and remain memorable. Use the language they use but leave out excessive acronyms. Conversely, over-simplifying communications subconsciously implies the marketer does not truly understand the company, the industry or its needs, and may well be disregarded by busy CXOs.

6. Pull them to events

Securing event attendance, whether virtual or face-to-face, may be difficult with CXOs, as they are always rushing off to another meeting. But if an event fits the bill with their personal interest and boasts an impressive guest list to facilitate peer-to-peer networking, it is still possible to meet and mix with these decision-makers. Offering the right communications to pull the c-level audience to an event is the key to their attendance and vital to encouraging good word-of-mouth discussion and referrals among CXO peer groups.

CONCLUSION:

5. Keeping the relationship alive

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» Salespeople on the frontline need to be prepared in just the same way as their colleagues from marketing «

Handing over to sales

Once you are confident you have identified interest, you are ready to move on to the next phase. Up until now, marketing has led the process. But now it is time to introduce the colleague that is going to visit the customer, so having invested time and resources into gathering insight and nurturing an intimate relationship with a customer, how can a salesperson then step in to seamlessly continue this customer intimacy?

This can indeed be a challenge. Marketing often takes responsibility for the top of the funnel, but then passes these relationships to the sales department – and this is where problems can arise. For example, frustrated salespeople will often come back and complain that an opportunity was a waste of time. This disconnect tends to be caused by one of two factors: either a poor-quality handover or an inadequate understanding of the customer's needs. Or both. In order to avoid these pitfalls, salespeople on the frontline need to be prepared in just the same way as their colleagues from marketing.

Most companies will have a CRM system that can provide a single view of the prospect across both of these departments, so that all of the insight and information is documented and accessible to the person who will be taking charge of the customer relationship.

» Once you have successfully nurtured the executive relationship, it is important not to then let it lapse «

Follow up and repeat purchase

Once you have successfully nurtured the executive relationship and achieved customer intimacy, it is important not to then let the relationship lapse.

Only engaging the customer at the point where you want something is a classic error. For example, you sell a 12-month contract, and when you get to month 11, you get in touch with the customer. They know why you're back in touch – it's because you want them to renew the contract.

Your job is not just to open the door, but to keep driving the dialogue so that if a story related to your area breaks about a customer three months into their 12-month contract, you get in touch. Don't stop communicating with the customer, you must continue the dialogue – it is the only way to maintain customer intimacy. From a sales and marketing standpoint, it is very easy to hand the customer over to the customer services team and then never bother to contact them again until it's time to ask for another order. But you must continue to invest interest. And that begins from the first day of the relationship, from the moment that the contract is signed.

Help the customer measure the value of the investment they are making in you. If you follow this advice, when you raise the matter of renewing the contract they will value you more because you have invested the time in them, and they are more likely to agree. Once a deal has been agreed, those B2B marketers who monitor delivery performance and client satisfaction are viewed as much more credible and will, therefore, have a better chance of securing repeat business. Furthermore, by maintaining the relationship, the cross-sell and up-sell piece also becomes much easier.

Tracking the c-suite between roles

An executive taking up a new position within their organisation, or moving to another business, is very often a good trigger for the B2B marketer to reach out. In a new capacity, executives will want to review existing contracts, and consider new ones. Having developed a meaningful relationship with the CXO, it is important for you to make a timely connection.

If you have the appropriate technology, engines and taxonomy, you can ensure the web and social media are mined for any activity that is contextually important – for instance, flagging a venture capital investment that is likely to lead to accelerated sales and marketing outreach, and that may act as a pre-cursor to new roles and priorities. Indeed, while relationship building remains one of B2B marketing's oldest skills, we should not overlook the latest tools that can assist us with this age-old technique.

About B2B Marketing



B2B Marketing

B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as B2B Marketing magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different forms and formats.

Its key products are:

- Online community
- Magazine
- Awards
- Research and reports
- Training
- Events
- Membership

For more information on any of these products or services go to b2bmarketing.net or call +44 (0)20 7014 4920

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