Cracking the C-Suite

A Practical Guide to Creating a Shared Future with Your Executive Customers

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Introduction – Why is it so darn difficult to reach these guys?

I have been an executive most of my adult life: most recently as the Chief Marketing Officer for NASDAQ traded and privately held software companies. I have also served as Director of Sales Training for the largest hotel company in the world - InterContiental Hotels & Resorts. During my twenty-some years as a corporate executive, many vendors have tried to get my attention; and, at the same time, I have tried to find ways for my sales force to get in touch with targeted decision-making executives.

This is one of the most difficult challenges that any sales and marketing executive is faced with. Sales professionals are under constant pressure to deliver on their performance goals, while Marketing is charged with helping them get access to the decision makers. Too often, companies take the approach of "We have a sales team. Let them bang their heads on the walls and let's see what will come out of it" or "Let's spend some money on taking our target executives to PGA Tour matches."

Do these tactics yield the desired results? Let me cut to the chase right now. There is no silver bullet when it comes to "cracking the C-Suite". Many approaches are doomed to fail from the start. Some might work in certain situations, some are simply too expensive to build and maintain and some unique approaches are innovative and creative. You really need a guide that will take you by the hand and explain how everything works. That's what this guidebook is all about. It is written from my personal experience as an executive and as the CEO of a company that provides access to executives.

There are two massive challenges when it comes to reaching out and engaging executives. If you want to succeed, you need to present a solution to these two issues. The first one is that executives have no time to spare. They are simply the most difficult audience to contact. This is not a startling revelation by any means. However, sales and marketing professionals regularly forget that executives are under enormous time pressure; and, even if your product or service has value, they might not get to see it. Not today, not next week, and certainly not next quarter, when new demands will crop up like daisies after the first rain. I should know. During my corporate years, I almost never answered my own phone. Furthermore, I have developed a massive "delete email" response and I never opened any direct mail item that was sent to me.

You have to be creative and think not only about reaching executives but also about what happens after you have made the initial contact. The real tragedy of sales is that we can get a meeting after months of preparations but then have nothing meaningful to say to the C-level executive. Such a scenario rarely translates to any long term relationship.

The second challenge is that C-suite executives are not interested in talking to you. They get their information first and foremost from other executives. That's why professional communities such as the "CMO Club" are so successful. They allow only Chief Marketing Officers to attend. Consequently, if you want to reach out to executives, you need to devise a way to get executives talking to each other.

I have tried just about every available method in order to connect with executives, and this book is a summary of my experiences and lessons learned along the way.

Chapter 1 – The Creative Approach to Engaging C-Suite Executives

In one of the companies that I have worked for, a “top ten” target company was Continental Airlines. The problem was that this prospect was owned by our biggest competitor and any attempt to penetrate the company met with an abrupt refusal to meet or even talk on the phone. It was really frustrating. I spent countless hours coming up with “smart” emails that focused on the benefits of our solution, dug up email addresses and phone numbers of relevant corporate officers and then tried to engage them and even sent chocolate to their assistants. Nice try but no results.

The situation with Continental Airlines became kind of a black hole that sucked everything in and nothing ever came back. The sales team practically gave up on this prospect and even some of my marketing employees tried to tell me that this was an uphill battle that was going nowhere. To be honest, I was ready to give up and move on to other target companies.

By that time, the entire office knew that I seeking ways to get in touch with a Continental Airlines executive. I made it a point to share my obsession with anyone who cared to listen, thinking to myself that you never know when someone might know someone else who could open the door. Then, one afternoon, the travel manager came to see me. He held in his hand a document that would prove to be the key to my search. He wasn’t sure if I would appreciate it; but, he figured that since it had the Continental Airlines name on it, I would be interested in seeing it. It was an invitation for travel managers of New Jersey-based corporations that had crossed a certain threshold of business with Continental.

I looked over the agenda that included “new travel regulations” and “serving you better” to see who would be there representing Continental. Needless to say, by that time I had committed to memory all of the corporate officers. To my surprise, the two scheduled speakers were the number one and number two people at Continental – Larry Kellner, Chairman and CEO and Jeff Smisek, President of the airline.

I immediately informed my travel manager that I would be attending this reception in his place at Newark Airport. He made the arrangements and several weeks later I found myself in a town hall kind of setting, with about 50 other travel managers. I was the only non-travel person in the room. After a sit-down lunch, Larry and Jeff came to the room, accompanied by several helpers and personal assistants.

Larry started to talk about his commitment to the success of the people in the room, and then it was time for a Q&A session. To my surprise, those travel managers were not holding back. They asked questions about new routes, complained about problems with reservation systems and delays at Newark and on and on. Larry and Jeff answered each question patiently, but I could see that they were not having a lot of fun in the process. It was time to make my move.

I raised my hand and introduced myself and the company that I worked for. I then told them that I would like to thank them for fantastic service levels and commitment to excellence. The other members of the travel community looked at me as if I were crazy. I actually did feel that Continental was a great airline; and, since I didn’t have to deal with the daily hassles of what these travel managers had to go through every day, I felt that what I was doing there was sharing my personal experience. The mood in the room shifted. Larry and Jeff were obviously relived to move from the "complaint" section to "how do we make things better" department.

As both of them were getting ready to leave I stepped outside of the conference room. Several minutes later, amid a flurry of hand clapping, they walked out, surrounded by their entourage. I called their name and asked for two minutes of their time. They recognized me as the fellow who threw them a lifeline at the meeting and I had their attention for 120 seconds. With no time to waste, I told them that my company had been doing business with theirs for the last ten years and that we were committed to this relationship. In the next thirty seconds, I explained what my company did and what would be the benefits to Continental. I then told them that one of our competitors was firmly entrenched in the account and my only request was to obtain a personal meeting with a specific Continental executive who they both knew well. Next, I handed both of them my card. Larry asked Jeff to follow up with me, thanked me again and left.

Three weeks later, a senior vice-president of Continental flew from Houston to New Jersey specifically to get together with me and my CEO for a three-hour meeting, which was followed by dinner. Mission accomplished!

The moral of the story is not that I am smarter than anyone else. God knows I am not. However, you need to spread the word and look for openings 24/7. Customer-sponsored events are a great way to meet with powerful executives, provided you have the creativity to break down some walls in the process.

I am not only talking about connecting with executives, I am living it. I have worked with global companies that have several hundred sales representatives and extensive marketing budgets as well as small companies with a dozen sales reps and a marketing team of one person. Only when I established my own company, IGNITE Advisory Group, did I truly come to grips with the hard reality of starting from scratch, still needing to connect with all these executives. As I grew my company, I had the opportunity to experiment first hand with many of the methods that I used in my corporate career. To my surprise, some strategies have worked beautifully while others - those that I had considered “fail proof”- failed miserably. The rest of this book looks at what works and what doesn’t in cracking the C-Suite.

Chapter 2 – Are You My Buddy or My Business Partner?

There are basically two schools of thought or approaches when it comes to engaging executives – the "*relationship*" approach and the "*business benefits*" approach. To a certain degree, they both work; but both approaches have some glaring weaknesses. My experience is that you need a combination approach of *relationships* plus *business benefits* to tip the odds in your favor. Programs that offer opportunities for peer exchange in addition to professional networking, such as customer advisory boards or executive councils, present this combination in a non-threatening environment (in other words, no aggressive sales pitches) and that's why they are so successful.

Proponents of the "relationship" approach invest in golf outings, tickets to the U. S. Open, and costly dinners and meetings in expensive venues. The logic here is that we are all human beings and in order to connect and create an "emotional" bond, we need to spend on programs and initiatives that emphasize the "human" element. This approach is especially useful in an "up" economy, when companies can afford to invest in these expensive exercises and when target executives are thinking about growth and not layoffs. However, in a "down" economy, this approach is doomed to failure. No one wants to incur added expenses and the executives are more concerned about saving their companies and their own careers.

On the other side of the spectrum is the "business benefits" approach. Here, proponents believe that if your particular service or product offers some business value to the target C-suite executive, then all you have to do is to let them hear about your merits and the executive will recommend you within her organization. This strategy leaves out all the touchy-feely relationship stuff and instead attempts to talk the target's language. In this category, we find expert panels, executive webinars and white papers co-sponsored with an Ivy League institution or a prestigious analyst group.

The assumption here is that the C-suite group is an intelligent bunch and only if you show them some demonstrable benefits will they be convinced. The challenge with this approach is that executives are bombarded with value-laden offerings every day. To penetrate through the "value fog" you need to have an exceptionally strong and compelling value proposition that will transcend everything else that is vying for the executive's attention at that given time. However, if you don't have the personal relationship to start with, how will you actually engage that executive?

A successful executive relationship program answers the following questions:

1. Why do you need these particular executives?
2. Who are the C-suite executives you are trying to reach?
3. Where are you going to find them?
4. What are they looking for?
5. How do you get their attention and engage them over the long run?

Let's examine each of these questions.

Why do you need these particular executives?

Anyone who has worked in sales or marketing is familiar with the following situation. You were able to gain access to a prospect by creating a relationship with a mid-level manager. These managers are more accessible than the C-suite executives and many times they are enthusiastic about your offering. All seems to be great so far.

Now, fast forward nine months. You are still stuck prospecting this company and no progress has been made. You really know your contact well by now and can even pick up little nuances from his voice, much the same as you are attuned to a family member. The only problem is that your project is sitting on ice and is going nowhere.

Nothing will move forward until someone who has the power to decide on a line item or someone who can exert considerable influence on the decision maker is willing to stand up and say, pretty much in these words, “I believe in this product/service/project. It will help us achieve market share/gain revenue/cut costs. We need to do it now or else we risk losing out to the competition/alienating customers/low employee morale." Unless an executive feels this way and is willing to exert influence within the organization to make your proposal happen, you can spend the rest of your life with your buddy, the mid-level manager.

Maybe you will earn a new friend in the process. This is an unexpected benefit that could serve you well in your personal life; but, if you need to close business and bring more deals in, this relationship will not help you achieve your goals. Instead, you need to access and engage the decision maker who can say "yes" to your offering. Every organization is composed of layers of employees who can say "no" but very few that can say "yes." The inhabitants of the C-suite can say "yes" if you are able to reach out to them and hold their interest for a long enough time.

Who are the C-Suite executives you are trying to reach?

According to the *Financial Times*, there are 630,000 executives in the U. S. who work at 72,000 corporations. This is quite a large number, even though this elite group represents only .02% of the population of the United States. Titles can be deceiving. For example, anyone who joins a financial organization in any kind of a managerial position is generally a vice president. If you want to be on the safe side, you need the “C” letter in their title. For a given and defined business unit, there can be only one CEO, only one CFO, and only one CMO.

Anyone with a “C” in their title is someone who can make decisions. General Managers and managing directors usually have executive power, but not always. Furthermore, a senior vice president who is closely aligned with a “C” player is a worthy addition to your target profile. You need to include those who either can make a decision or push for a decision to be made. These are the people that you need to target. As you can imagine, these are the same people that everyone is trying to reach out to.

Do you know who is trying the hardest to get a piece of these people’s time? You got it right – employees in their own organizations who are vying to get on their calendars. Some of this time is work related, but a lot of it is masked as a business request while the employee is actually trying to work on a promotion, get an increased budget for his department or plot some moves against an internal opponent.

This situation is sad but true. Unfortunately, even these “inside workers”, who carry a corporate name badge and see the personal assistant every day are having a difficult time getting a meeting with the C-suite executive. Are you starting to get the feeling that this is not an easy thing to do? Don’t despair, because there are proven methods that will work for you.

Where are you going to find them?

The short answer is that you need to meet them wherever they tend to spend their time, either in person or online. The problem is that we are not living in a perfect world where access to executives is granted freely. If you were given $10 million by your CEO to engage these executives, you could probably commit to the following activities:

1. Pay for a county club membership for your top sales director and allow him/her a lot of time in the club. (Yes, sure. I know that

sounds like a fantasy job; but, I am trying to make a point here, so bear with me.)

2. Pay for your top executives to take extended vacations in places such as Aspen, Colorado and Bora Bora. Encourage your executives to bring their families with them.
3. Hire a prestigious yacht for an exclusive series of executive cruises around Manhattan.
4. Sponsor a road show with a business luminary (think Google co-founders) that is held in Four Seasons Hotels around the country.
5. Take prime ad space in the Financial Times, the Economist, Harvard Business School publications, etc.
6. Run a series of TV ads on CNBC. (That will cut down your budget very quickly.)

You get the point. Trying to seduce these executives is an extremely expensive and rather cost- prohibitive method. You need to find them in their corporate positions, not at their cherished vacations spots. You need to find new and creative ways of engaging this exclusive audience without spending your entire sales and marketing budget in the process.

What are they looking for?

Executives are looking for any proven method or offering that can help them drive revenues, gain market share or cut costs. If it can make them appear to be a hero in the process, all the better. They are not looking for anything that will cause their lives to become more complicated or that will place their companies or their personal careers at risk.

How do you engage them and keep this engagement over the long run?

This is what this book is all about. If your goal is to engage these executives, you need to provide the following:

1. Clear and compelling business value.
2. Access to other executives (not just from your company).
3. A demonstrable ability to commit to a long term goal vs. a short term approach.

The next chapter will explore some of the more common ways to engage these executives.

Chapter 3 – Practical Ways to Engage Executives

Here, we are talking about the approaches most commonly taken when you have at your disposal a direct sales force.

There are many books that were written on how to find the decision makers. Nowadays, databases such as Hoover, Reuters or OneSource make this task much easier. I have found that LinkedIn is an excellent tool to locate the basic information you will need about a particular executive. Social networks such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter offer exciting possibilities to connect, but a word of caution here. There seems to be a divide in terms of the age of executives that are using social media communities. The age "limit" seems to be around 35. Any one older than 35 is less likely to use social media; so, if you are targeting CFO's with big financial services firms, don't waste your time on social media platforms. You will not find them there.

The Relationship Approach

Did you know that NASDAQ OMX, the company that manages NASDAQ, the electronic network of stock dealers, keeps "personnel files" on the CEOs of the top 200 technology companies listed on NASDAQ? What kind of information might be in such a personnel file? Besides common data such as employment history, educational background and marital status, organizations that track C-level executives will record things such as minor league participation by one of the kids. Then, they may look to sponsor some of the team activities or help in creating a new stadium. If the C- level executive's wife is on a local charity's board, then the corporation might suddenly become a benefactor of that charity, no matter how obscure or small scale it might be.

These types of "personal searches" are often about what surrounds the executive – his country club, his family, his favorite sport and sport teams, his favorite charity and even what he likes to eat and drink. This type of personal information doesn't come cheaply. You need to invest many hours in market research and interview lots of people, almost becoming an investigative reporter in the process.

How is this information useful? If the company doing the targeting and snooping learns that a particular executive is supporting a breast cancer foundation in her hometown of Trenton, New Jersey, they might become a sponsor in the next breast cancer event. This will give them an *indirect* way to get into an informal meeting with that executive. They could also support the Lacrosse team at a local high school that the executive's son in playing in. You get the idea. This strategy can succeed, but it requires massive investment and focus.

Customer-Sponsored Events

These are events that your target company and executives are producing. The Continental Airlines anecdote mentioned earlier is an example of what I am talking about.

Analyst Events

Better results occur at analyst events. Analyst groups run events on a regular basis. Here is a more intimate crowd that was carefully selected. The event itself is usually a one-day affair. There are no trade showings or booths. I have found that the IDC events (www.idc.com) are the best ones. Frost & Sullivan (www.frost.com) runs rather good events as well. The Gartner (www.gartner.com) events are good for thought leadership, not for leads. My advice is that you should not sponsor anything. Just attend as a participant. They usually charge $500 to $1,000 per day. This is not a bad price, considering that you will get access to some real executives.

How can you maximize your time at these affairs? It starts with doing some homework beforehand. First and foremost, start with all the speakers. "Google" them and their companies. Find out what they are passionate about. At the right time, politely introduce yourself. Let them know that you have done your homework by referring to their work, beyond the presentation that they are giving at the event. Then mention your top benefits. "We help your company connect with your executive customers. We can do it for you." Offer your card, get their business card and that's it. You are finished for now. Don't try to develop any conversation beyond that. It will just annoy them. Instead, follow up with a phone call to their office that same evening by asking to set up a meeting to discuss their needs.

Exclusive C-level Events

At the top of the pyramid are global events such as the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, which is just about the most prestigious event in the world. One rung below are high-level executive forums and seminars offered by the Economist, The Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times or Forbes Magazine. Many of these events are by invitation only, and the cost of the event is underwritten by the sponsors. It's an elegant way to get your target leads into a prestigious event, but it costs an exorbitant amount to sponsor one of these affairs.

It is great if you can afford to be such a sponsor. Otherwise, look for events that charge a general admission of about $2,500. Generally, you will not find the top decision makers at these conferences, but you will be able to connect with executives who report to those in the C-suite. This is a great investment for your time and money.

One-on-One Executive Conferences

The set up for such a conference is similar. Your company, as the sponsor, pays from $20k to $50k for an event organizer such as Marcus Evans or GDS Events. In return, you are guaranteed ten to twenty one-on-one meetings with high-level executives from your target market. These events always take place at settings such as a Ritz Carlton resort, and usually include golf and other social events, which and are quite useful in meeting with C-suite executives. The trick here is to make sure that the meeting organizer has strict rules regarding a “no substitution” policy.

Many times, you are promised to meet with the CFO of Home Depot, for example, only to find out at the conference that you are meeting with one of his direct reports. Instead of being disappointed and wasting your time and money, make sure that before you sign a contract with one of these vendors, you have a written guarantee that if you don’t get to make the acquaintance of the executives you were planning on meeting, you will receive some sort of remuneration. On a personal note, I had very good results when I used GDS Events, especially if you are trying to reach executives in the financial services industry.

Member-Only Events

Hands down, this is the best place to have meaningful conversations with executives in a non- sales environment. Membership clubs such as the CMO Club (www.thecmoclub.com) and The Conference Board are geared for members and a very limited number of consultants and vendors. My recommendation is to get your company's relevant executive to sign up right now for these organizations. Your CFO should join a CFO member organization, your CMO a CMO organization, etc. Dollar for dollar, this is the best networking opportunity you can get, excluding a really customized customer advisory board.

Large Trade Shows

I firmly believe that the age of the large trade shows is over. During my corporate career, I have spent as much as a $100k for a single event, not including T&E (travel and expenses) and time away from their usual responsibilities for the sales and marketing teams. Nowadays, the big trade shows attract mostly consultants looking for projects or job seekers. You will be hard pressed to come out with real qualified leads, because most executives are too busy to attend trade shows. Exceptions occur when there are new product launches or if a company just acquired another company and they need to talk to their customers and suppliers. Many trade show organizers now offer one-on-one meetings with chosen companies. The cost can be quite reasonable - around $1,000 for a twenty-minute meeting. Do your homework; and, if the right executive happens to be at the trade show, that will be a golden opportunity to connect with him/her.

Solution Selling

We have all tried it. Our sales force is selling to one functional area of the enterprise while our company's future is in selling to other parts of the business. It could be a company that sold contact center solutions for years to IT directors and Call Center Managers and now has a new Business Intelligence offering. They need to reach out to other executives who have never heard of that company.

Another company could be selling insurance software to Chief Information Officers. Their software actually presents business results that business users need, but they are only selling to CIO's. These are their contacts. How can they "bridge over" and approach other lines of business executives without offending their current contacts?

One prevalent solution is to train the sales force in what is commonly called "solution selling". The purpose is to get your sales representatives to talk and think like senior business executives, instead of arriving at a customer meeting and just spelling out boring product features and functions. The truth is that no one cares about your product as much as you do. Usually, the only thing a prospect really cares about is whether or not you can help him solve a business problem.

There are many sales training consultants and companies. During my corporate career, I have used or attended seminars by all the leading names, such as Miller Heiman, SPIN Selling, and

The Complex Sale. Each company comes out with their own version of the truth. Each has its own sales process and methodology. My advice is to make sure that the trainers have two essential qualities: first, personal experience as sales executives and second, a verifiable track record in training.

You would be surprised at how many people in the training business do not have actual sales experience. The companies they work for employ excellent sales people who are able to close new business, but sometimes you are getting "professional trainers" who deliver the actual training and lack "real world sales credibility". It's almost impossible to fake it, especially in front of sales people who can spot lack of sales experience immediately. Another problem is that there are excellent sales executives who are poor trainers.

Unfortunately, there is nothing much that you can do about this failing, as it takes years to develop professional training and facilitation skills; and, some people are just not cut out for it. Make sure that the people who will conduct the sales training have real life experience and can relate to and successfully train your employees.

After a "solution sales" training seminar, what often happens is that your top performers improve their performance by a small margin, your average performers will initially do worse as they implement the new techniques and then they will do much better and you your poor performers will not improve at all. Consequently, Solution selling is usually more useful to your average performers.

Selling To VITO

I have first learned about the book, *Selling to VITO* by Tony Parinello, from one of the top sales representatives in a software company I used to work with. This fellow was constantly on the President's Club list and he attributed a part of his success to Tony Parinello's book. "VITO" is an acronym for a Very Important Top Officer. This book is filled with practical tips on how to send a customized letter to a C-suite executive, how to follow up by phone and how to deal with all the gate keepers surrounding the executive. It is recommended for anyone who is aggressive enough to try Mr. Parinello's techniques.

Public Relations and Advertising

Reaching executives through traditional advertising is a risky business, since the acid test is whether or not you have enough money to sustain long term campaigns. Advertising on CNN or CNBC is beyond the financial resources of most companies. A one-page ad in the New York Times costs about $30k. Many businesses can afford this one-time cost, but it means nothing if all you do is put your name in the newspaper for this one time. You would need a campaign, and those costs add up quickly. However, The Financial Times has an interesting value proposition. For as little as $3k a month, the newspaper will include inserts or stickers with your company name to be placed in their newspapers at strategic places, such as the JFK Airport VIP lounge or the Harvard Club. Alternatively, you can “sponsor” delivery of the newspaper for one month for all Four Seasons hotels on the East Coast. I like this approach as it makes a lot of sense to me. Its focus is targeted and it doesn’t cost a great deal.

Although Public Relations is sometimes referred to as the “poor man’s advertising choice”, I am a real believer in the power of great PR. If you are able to find a PR agency that delivers excellent results, paying a retainer of $10 - $15k a month is worth it. The credibility factor is higher coming from newscasters and reporters; and, the cost, compared to traditional advertising, is minimal. Just be sure that you have a story that will catch the attention of your target executives. Otherwise, you will be wasting your time and money.

Chapter 4 – Creating a Shared Future with Your Customers

As you can see from the previous examples, getting to executives and engaging them over the long run is a tricky business. I am going to share with you a fail-proof method for getting all your target executives to come to you, without you having to pay them to come! Furthermore, this solution allows you to solve elegantly another huge challenge that your sales force is facing each day – the actual conversations with the C-suite. Should one of your sales reps be successful in reaching out and creating this precious face time with an executive, real challenges still can emerge. For example, what exactly does the rep tell them and how does he/she sustain the relationship?

People will tell you that to be successful, it is necessary to speak in the prospect's language. This usually means that you should talk about recent industry trends, their last quarterly report or some other business metrics. Of course, the goal is to find a *problem* that your *solution* can solve. The difficulty is that it takes an incredible amount of preparation to become even remotely familiar with a specific company, and that's assuming that the sales professional is familiar with that particular industry. You really need to be on the inside to understand fully how a company works. To assume that you can walk into an executive office after you have spent a few hours doing research on the Internet is arrogant and amateurish.

In order to be effective, you need to know how that executive is looking at the industry, his own company and your company. You need to enter "their mind" so to speak. If you can do this, you will create instant rapport and credibility. This executive will think, "Wow, this person is not like the rest of them. He really gets it. This is interesting."

You might ask yourself, "Why go through all this trouble to learn about one particular company?" That's a great question. The answer is that most executives think alike. If you are able to bring together a group of executives from a given industry and engage them in a meaningful dialogue over the long term, you will know exactly how they look at your company, how they describe it and what they like to see and hear. This is a gold mine of information! If there is one thing that I learned during my long and varied career in sales training, marketing and executive relationships, it is that the old marketing adage "perception is reality" is a lesson that should be kept close to your heart at all times.

You can have the most brilliant marketing team, which will come up with amazing value propositions, describing your company as the "next wave of business intelligence" or another mouthful such as that; but, the prospect or customer may refer to you simply as "the company that records our calls at the call center." In this scenario, you will be more productive talking about how recording all these calls and analyzing them creates valuable business information. Talking within the prospect's mindset allows for a meeting of the minds, because the perceived opinions appear the same from both sides of the conversation.

What is a customer advisory board? A customer advisory board consists of a group of senior executives who meet on a regular basis to serve as your strategic partners and offer free guidance and insights. Creating such a group is a unique and elegant way to assemble your chosen, targeted customer executives without paying them for their time or advice. In fact, if handled correctly, the concept of a Customer Advisory Board (CAB) or a Partner Advisory Council (PAC) will act as a magnet to bring all of them together. Furthermore, at some point, the participants may be willing to refer executive prospects from other companies to your company. This idea sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? As with anything else in life and in business, the successful design and delivery of a CAB is both an art and a science. What are the "secret ingredients" that will make it a success?

1. You must have a **compelling, strategic theme** that will attract the right executives. It sounds simple, but I routinely spend a significant amount of time with my clients going through a discovery phase, trying to find a common theme. Companies are very good at articulating what is interesting for them but they often struggle looking at their solutions or products from the customer's perspective. The work here is akin to what a management consultant would do on a strategic project, but the focus and lens is the prospect's or customer's lens.

2. The board needs to include **peers of equal stature**. The closer they are in terms of how many people they manage, their areas of responsibility and the size of their companies, the more meaningful the suggestions of the board will be. Executives like to be with other executives that are like them in terms of power and responsibility.

3. The **recruitment campaign** must be managed in a professional and creative way

4. **Bringing the executives onboard** is an extremely important step in ensuring that their meaningful issues are captured correctly, preferably by an objective third party who will not defend existing policies and with whom the executives will feel comfortable sharing feedback

5. The board is about peer exchange, so care must be taken to ensure **the members get to do most of the talking**. Usually, a trained facilitator is a must at this stage.

6. **Overall program management** – There will be lots of moving parts which need constant attention. I was on a call with one of my clients and that was the first conference call before an actual event. After about five minutes, the conversation fizzled out. I had to jump in and stoke the fire several times until the board found the areas they needed to focus on.

Chapter 5 – Common Mistakes To Avoid in Executive Engagement

There are times when you are finally able to reach an executive or group of executives only to butcher the entire experience. An example from the world of customer advisory boards will illustrate this point. As a reminder, a CAB is a group of executives who are invited to come together regularly to mentor an organization. A few years ago, I met with a New York City-based software company that was interested in setting up a customer advisory board as a way to enlist the help of their top customers and open up new sales opportunities.

This software company heard what I had to say and they were impressed by some of the references that I provided; but, ultimately, they decided that they did not need my services and could do it themselves. I wished them good luck and moved on with my business. A year went by and the CEO of the company called me and requested a meeting, saying that he wasn't happy with the results they had gotten from their advisory board.

After listening to the CEO’s recollection of the past year’s meetings, I was able to figure out that they had made substantial mistakes in creating an executive community. This company is not unique. I have seen many others “butcher” the fine art and science of executive relationships. We can learn from their following mistakes.

Common mistakes in executive engagement

1. **Starting with a clear product orientation**. The company spent 60% of the face to face meeting going over detailed product demos and talking to their customers about their product road map. This strains any potential relationship building and all but certainly ensures that the attendees won’t want to come to further meetings. The advisory board members need to feel a sense of shared future with your company rather than becoming an extension of your product management team.
2. **Preaching to your customers why your products and services are the best**.

Customers hate to listen to a sales pitch in this passive, non-sales environment. If you like to drink your own Kool-Aid, talk to your colleagues about it, not to your executive customers.

3. **Monopolizing the podium.** Apparently, company executives spoke for 70% of the time, leaving little room for the executive customers to talk about their business issues. The main reason executives flock to these meetings is to hear and be heard by their peers, not by you.
4. **Not following up on comments and suggestions**. This is a surefire way of alienating a dedicated group of customers who are taking time out of their busy schedules, only to find out that no one is taking their feedback seriously. The company promised the customers a follow-up document in three months, with a list of action items that needed to be completed by that time. For some reason, no one assumed responsibility for this task. Consequently, the document was never created and presented. Instead of taking responsibility and admitting their lack of follow up, company executives decided to "brush it under the carpet", hoping that their customers would not

notice. It is important to realize that customers never forget a promise that is made to them!

5. **Inviting anyone from your company who wants to attend the meeting** and then having them actually present at the event. If you choose to placate your colleagues who insist on being part of this meeting, you risk the success of the entire event. This company had the entire product management group present, in addition to the entire sales management team. What a way to send the wrong message to your customers!
6. **Trying to close new business at the advisory board meeting**. Here, we are talking about employing strong and aggressive sales tactics. Nothing will turn off customer advisory executives more than a thinly-veiled sales effort aimed at them!
7. **Issuing a one-sided press release about the advisory board** - with customer names and photos included - without asking for permission first. Again, executives do not want to feel like they are being used for your PR activities.
8. **Inviting customers who are at completely different position/career levels to the board,** e.g., a CEO and a junior product manager. If

the CEO of one of your customer organizations must interact with someone in this capacity that is much less experienced and has much less to offer, the CEO will most certainly be irritated and may refrain from future participation.

9. **Treating the advisory board as a focus group** and resisting any initial attempt to raise the bar to more important and strategic discussions. A focus group is convened to help a company make a decision on a given product or service. Executives are interested in a high-level, ongoing dialogue on real, strategic issues and challenges.
10. **Discontinuing the board after the first meeting**. This will send a message that the board is not really that important and will also convey the notion that your company is not truly interested in soliciting and embracing customer feedback and insight. In this case, the customers informed the company that they were not interested in attending any future events.

As you can see, these mistakes created a fatal blow to the reputation of this particular company in the eyes of its customers. There was nothing that I could do to salvage the situation, as company executives didn't see the need for taking responsibility and starting anew, with the right structure, process and metrics. My final recommendation to the CEO was not to create another advisory board unless he is fully committed to the effort. I hope that he heeded that message.

My experience indicates that successful executive engagement programs merge business benefits with personal benefits, while allowing for peer exchange and professional networking at the same time. Even though these executives are part of your customer base, under the right circumstances, they may be interested in referring other executives from other companies to you and your sales team.

Chapter 6 – Engage Executives with Thought Leadership

By "thought leadership", we are referring to sponsored research papers, speaking at industry events and submitting "thought leadership" articles for publications. From my perspective, these efforts demand a lot of work without producing any real benefits. Let's look at one prolific area of thought leadership, the "white paper industry". To be blunt, if there is one area that should be shut down completely, it is the entire "white paper" industry. I just don't get it. Companies spend as much as $30k for a white paper, co-sponsored by an analyst firm, then put it on the web and print glossy hand outs that no one reads. What's wrong with this picture?

For one thing, executives are very selective about what they read. They generally have a limited time allotted to reading material; and, in that time, they always need to prioritize. Should they scan the minutes of the latest board meeting? How about a new corporate HR policy regarding compensation? Or, perhaps, an interesting and timely article in The Wall Street Journal about one of their competitors? What is the chance that they will pay attention to fifteen pages of text, charts and statistics that form your precious white paper?

How about your sales team? Sale professionals are known to read items that are short and insightful. Generally, they do not like to spend their time pouring through long and obscure white papers with reams of data but without useful and immediate information that can help advance a sale. However, there is an exception. If the white paper is written by a customer or a prospect, then, both the executive and the sales professional will pay a good deal of attention to what is being said.

You get the picture. If you want "thought leadership", don't pay an analyst or use up your product marketing folks' time. Instead, work with your existing customers to create compelling and interesting thought leadership pieces that will not focus exclusively on your company or the ROI that these customers were able to achieve using your special offerings. Everybody else is doing it. This sort of blatant self promotion is boring, and any prospect can see it coming from a mile away.

I recommend that you take a completely fresh and innovative approach. Don't use your customers to demonstrate that you have the best products and services. Instead, position them as industry thought leaders and benefit by the power of association. The white paper should position your customers as intelligent and insightful experts on the industry, technology or regulatory forces that shape your business. You will benefit by power of association. Remember, the more subtle and indirect you are in your approach, the better results you will achieve with your target market.

Now that you have completed considering the suggestions in this guidebook, it is time to act. Best wishes on cracking the C-suite and using it to your company's advantage!

About the Author

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As CEO of IGNITE, Eyal assists Fortune 2000 companies looking to reach out and engage senior decision makers in order to open up new sales opportunities and relationships. Previously, Eyal served as a senior vice president with the Soundbridge Group, a global business and media company, which operates in North America, Europe and China, serving customers such as IBM, Intel, McKinsey and Harvard Business School.

Eyal served as the CMO of NICE Systems (NASDAQ:NICE), a Contact Center Business

Intelligence leader that sells to 85% of the Fortune 500. During his time with NICE, Eyal was responsible for a national media and education campaign that helped generate an incremental $1.3B of shareholder value in five years. Previously, Eyal served as the Director of Corporate Sales Training for the European division of InterContinental Hotels Group (NYSE: IHG), the largest hotel group in the world.

Eyal is a nationally-recognized expert on marketing strategies for engaging the C-suite. He has appeared on CNN, NBC, ABC, and the BBC, and he has been featured in The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Fortune and Business Week. He is the author of *Cracking the C-Suite: A Practical Guide to Creating a Shared Future with Your Executive Customers*, a contributing author to the book *Marketing in the age of Social Media* and the author of a travel novel published in Israel entitled *Before the Kids & a Mortgage*.

Eyal holds an MBA from Boston University and is a graduate of the Columbia University Business School leadership program.

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3. www.Gartner.com
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One-on-One Executive Events Companies

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2. www.gdsinternational.com
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Major U. S. Business Newspapers and Magazines

1. Financial Times
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3. The Economist
4. BusinessWeek
5. The Wall Street Journal
6. The New York Times