

## PITCHING EXECUTIVES: AN AGENT'S GUIDE TO THROWING THE BALL SUCCESSFULLY

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Approaching an executive with your provider plans and other services should be guided by four simple rules. These are: 1) know everything you can, in advance, about the executive, his company, and its needs; 2) know how your services fit into those needs; 3) know how your services compare to those of others; and 4) determine, before your first meeting, what your "best bet" for making a successful approach will be.

1 – The Preparation – In our management consulting firm, we frequently remind ourselves that *preparation is everything*. Advance preparation is particularly useful because, in addition to providing *needed information* for your first contact with a CEO, it also arms you with an important *aura of confidence*. Preparing carefully for the visit by finding out absolutely everything you can about the company and the individual who leads it will prove very useful. And, this doesn't mean simply going on the company's website – because almost nothing is provided there that is actually useful for you. It actually means calling friends, acquaintances and other contacts in the company's industry -- those who can provide you with useful insights about the company's structure, its recent challenges, and its goals for the future.

2 – The Fit – To be successful in pitching high-level executives such as CEOs you'll want to have something intriguing to offer them. That is, you'll need to determine what would work best for their businesses and why that is. And, you'll need to be able to present these ideas *succinctly* (because CEOs don't have time to spare) as well as *interestingly*. On the latter point, if you're thinking of giving a flat, factual presentation, don't bother. There's no point in wasting your time and that of the CEO. Spend time in advance thinking of clever analogies you can offer and witty linkages to sports teams, games and other areas of common interest between you and the CEO. (You'll have an advance idea of what these might be from the research you've conducted.) Your goal for this first session is to have this CEO become your friend. The first visit is the time for the relationship building stage of the sales process. So, set aside your burning desire to pitch your products and make the sale. Instead, take this time to get to know the person you're talking with – on his level. For this to be a complete and successful sales process, the encounter must be a meeting of equals. Thus, a relationship must be formed that is based on a collegial bonding and an understanding that you're both after the same thing – he is interested in getting the best services for his company . . . and you are, as well. You will need to walk away from this conversation with his being secure in that knowledge.

3 – The Comparison – Uppermost in the executive's mind will be the question of how the services of your firm can be distinguished from those of others. You will want to have a ready answer and even volunteer the information before there is a request for it. It's better to be seen as the "proactive player" than as a "performer" in response to a barrage of questions. *Performers* are simply that – they dance to someone else's tune; whereas *players* are seen as equal partners in the quest for good services, better ideas. Thus, try to avoid falling into the trap of simply responding to questions that are fired at you. Be proactive and provide the information without being asked, while at the same time avoiding the temptation to make a sales pitch. By providing answers and solutions that demonstrate you've done your homework and that anticipate the firm's needs, you will have a better chance of gaining the executive's confidence and being perceived as on the same wave-length.

4 – The Best Bet – Your earlier research on the CEO and the firm will already have guided you in determining what products will be your best bets to pitch. These determinations form your "operating hypothesis" as you enter the meeting. Test the hypothesis throughout the meeting as you continue your discussion with the executive. And be ready on a moment's notice to bring out other products or offerings that, once the conversation has expanded, appear to be more suited to the company's needs. Regardless of what paths the conversation takes, make sure you leave the meeting with a sound understanding between the two of you regarding what the needs are and what the products are that can supply those needs. As you

are wrapping up the conversation, mention to the executive that you will send additional information on the areas he's interested in both via email (for the immediacy of receipt) and by post or messenger (to ensure that he has hard copies and more embellished versions of the promotional materials).

In thinking about the overall result of the meeting, think about this maxim that we use at Leading and Learning, Inc. We believe that we should always *try to do something that impresses the person* we're talking with. This can mean that we leave him something he'll find intriguing later. For example, I often take along one of Peter Drucker's books, or one of my own, when I'm making the first client visit. Or, I leave one of my company's *FastPockets* that have briefer version of some of the same ideas presented in the books. You can also make a point of doing or saying something that will leave a lasting (*positive*) impression – For example, by quoting a famous person like Lincoln or Churchill who have said something appropriate to the occasion and the company that you are visiting, you will be remembered for your intellect as well as for your thoughtfulness about the company you're visiting. Making a good impression in any one or more of these ways, sets you apart from other agents who will be talking to the CEO. Thus, it ensures that the executive will take your return call – either for a phone conversation to clarify points, or for a second meeting to wrap up the deal.

*Happy pitching – here's to a winning ballgame!*

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