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August 2005

### Marketing to the C-Suite

Why the most effective target may not be in the corner office

By Scott Hornstein Coauthor of Opt-In Marketing: Increase Sales Exponentially With Consensual Marketing, and President, Hornstein Associates, Redding, Connecticut

If I am to believe what I hear, jumping the corporate ranks and getting your message directly into the C-suite is the manna that will feed a hungry sales force wandering in the wilderness. This viewpoint maintains that the sales and marketing juggernaut should either ignore or climb over those pesky business-unit executives on the way to the corner office. Then, upon absorbing your message, a vice president will weep with relief and open the discretionary budget floodgates.

In reality, it's often those pesky directors and managers who are the real decision makers, and bringing them value, as they define it, is the way to the C-suite and a long-term relationship.

To better understand what customers really think (which is often different from our suppositions), we conduct "voice-of-customer" research on behalf of our clients, which involves one-on-one interviews. The following comments from a chief information officer (and other executives, cited here) are representative of what we've heard over the course of many research projects for many companies:

"You marketing guys are all alike. You think that because I'm the CIO you have to send everything to me. I get tons of stuff from you and all your competitors. Let me tell you something, this is not how we make decisions. I have talented people responsible for their own areas. You're using me as an executive mailroom, and I don't appreciate it."

Apparently, marketing is not winning the heart or mind of this CIO. The department should be talking directly to the executives responsible for running the day-to-day business. A vice president of marketing, meanwhile, shared the following thought regarding how outside products and services are evaluated:

"I don't make those decisions. The executives with the direct responsibility make all the hire-and-fire decisions. I review and evaluate the results of the business unit."

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The problem is the current marketing paradigm, which is a numbers game. The thought process is: "If I push enough stuff out there, someone will respond. And I want the C-suite." This broadcast mentality may find a few people who are interested, but it has delivered irrelevant and potentially irritating messages to the vast majority. And if you are targeting the C-suite, that's who is trashing your communications.

Target by identifying and pursuing substantial opportunity. If you are looking to penetrate or increase your share of corporate budget and provide long-term value to a company, invest time and energy. Find out how it makes a business decision. Find out who is actually involved in the decision-making process. What information do they need? When do they need it? Who are the influencers? Prove your worth to those who will immediately benefit: the line business-unit executives. Let them take the results to the C-suite, which will increase the impact of your C-level messaging.

Each prospect touch must be value-added and interactive; a response is a rare opportunity to listen and learn. Subsequent touches should build on the accumulated knowledge. Here is what business-unit executives have said are the messages they value:

"Tell me how others in my industry have benefited from your product or service, with detailed results and contact information."

"Give me information on advances that will affect my results."

"Give it to me in print, so I have something to take into a meeting—something professional to show my boss."

Does your message belong in the C-suite? Of course. Do you need executive preference to enrich your long-term relationship? Absolutely. But your message is most effective when borne on the shoulders of the line executives. s&mm

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