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✍ Bob Apollo



About the author

Bob Apollo is the founder of UK-based Inflexion-Point Strategy Partners, the sales and marketing performance improvement specialists. Following a successful career spanning start-ups to corporates, Apollo now works with a growing client base of expansion-phase technology companies, helping them to systematically establish their uniquely relevant value to their customers.

Long ago and far away, there was a time when “selling to the C-level” was a credible and often effective strategy. Dozens – maybe hundreds – of sales books were written on the subject. If you could successfully sell to the top, so the authors claimed, sales success would surely follow.

Now, there’s no doubt that senior executives still play a significant role in decision making. But it’s also clear that there are a growing number of influential stakeholders involved in every complex, high-value buying decision. The authors of *The Challenger Customer* – published in 2015 – concluded that an average of 5.4 different people were formally involved in the average B2B buying decision.

That’s just an average figure (and almost certainly already out of date). In many complex sales situations, the number of actively engaged stakeholders can easily reach double figures – and the upward trend shows no sign of abating. It’s easy to understand why this is happening: buyers have become more risk averse and, in the absence of a clear consensus for change, are most comfortable sticking with the status quo.

Ineffective strategy

Now, it’s hard enough trying to sell to a small group of decision makers, but as the number of involved individuals continues to grow – often with different priorities and agendas – reaching, engaging and persuading them all becomes a high-on impossible task. And it turns out that it wouldn’t be an effective strategy anyway.

You see, there’s a body of compelling research to suggest that even if you could successfully reach them, crafting individually tailored value propositions for each of them would actually reduce your chances of success. That’s because if we want a decision to be approved, it turns out that it’s far

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more effective to appeal to the group’s collective situation, rather than their individual priorities.

Mobilisers

But we’re going to need some inside help if we’re to achieve this: someone who can act as a catalyst for change within the customer, and who can help to build a “coalition of the willing” amongst their colleagues. The authors of *The Challenger Customer* refer to these people as mobilisers, and in any complex deal it’s essential to assess whether our current prime contact fits this profile.

These mobilisers don’t necessarily have to be the ultimate decision authority (in fact they often aren’t), but they are widely respected by their colleagues, politically astute and have the practical ability to guide, influence and align their colleagues in the decision-making process. They typically have a successful track record of making change happen within their organisation, so they are easier to identify than you might at first think, if you ask the right questions.

Status quo

It’s easy to understand why so many complex buying decisions – even if they at one stage look promising – end with the prospect simply deciding to stick

with the status quo. After all, unless they are faced with what the former CEO of Nokia memorably referred to as a “burning platform”, doing nothing is often the easiest thing for a group of stakeholders with unaligned personal agendas to agree on.

In the absence of an effective mobiliser or an over-arching reason to change, the most likely outcome is that the team will end up deciding that their easiest option is to stick with the status quo. It’s why, according to Sales Benchmark Index, over 60% of even apparently well-qualified sales opportunities are lost to “do nothing” rather than to a competitor.

Whenever you’re facing a complex sales situation with multiple stakeholders, I strongly recommend that you determine whether you’re currently working with and through a prime contact who seems to be an obvious mobiliser; if you’re not, then look around carefully to see if there is a potential candidate elsewhere within the customer’s decision team.

Working with a mobiliser won’t guarantee your success in a complex sale, but failing to identify and engage one will certainly increase your chance of failure.