Using presentations to cultivate stronger customer relationships

By Mark Shonka and Dan Kosch

Making the sale plants the seed that grows a customer relationship. But it takes care and attention to cultivate that relationship so that it bears fruit in the long run. Unfortunately, even the most astute account managers can face unexpected issues that can cause even the strongest partnerships to wither.

Moreover, the environment in which you manage and grow an account relationship is not unlike the one in which you had to sell – it's very challenging and here are some reasons why:

Competition: Your competition won't wilt and fade away just because you're on top for the moment. In fact, like a weed that becomes pesticide-resistant, they may become even more aggressive, constantly seeking an opportunity to choke you out.

Differentiation: In selling to your customer, you had to demonstrate what made your company stand apart from the competition. Never stop selling them, because if you don't demonstrate every day that you are critical to their strength and success, they'll forget and the weeds of doubt will creep in.

Price: There have always been people who make price, not value, their number one priority – they're called procurement officers. Once relegated to the back offices back in the day, they are now firmly entrenched in the executive wing. They're smart and savvy, and some of them can be cut-throat. They've transformed purchasing into a science. They pull out all of the stops to get the lowest price possible; using innovative technology and processes – everything from quality initiatives that streamline purchasing procedures to buying consortiums to online vendor auctions where the lowest bidder wins. Often, their purpose is to make price the only issue.

Credit for value: You've toiled to educate your customers about the value you bring to the relationship. Getting credit for that value is important to your ability to make that relationship flourish.

And there are other challenges, including keeping your projects a priority, changes in your customer's organization, and managing their ever-growing expectations.

An intelligent way to get to the root of these issues is selling to and working with your customer's senior executives. They are the ones who are most invested in ensuring you continue to deliver value. They establish the priority projects, they are concerned about the economic health of the business and they are the ones focused on the future. Your vision should be the same. You need to seek opportunities to get in front of those decision makers to continually demonstrate the benefits of a strategic – and ongoing – business relationship between your companies. And, when you have those opportunities, you must take full advantage of them.

Reaching senior-level executives is critical and the techniques you could use to do that can fill an additional article. In this one, however, we'll focus on how to make the most of every moment you are in front of them by reinforcing the value of an ongoing relationship. Essentially, your goal is to show them that like two vines that intertwine, a solid partnership will help your customer become stronger and better able to withstand the winds of adversity.

The most effective way to impart the power of partnership is by delivering compelling, captivating and memorable business presentations periodically and proactively.

Why a Presentation

Because it offers you an impressive advantage. A presentation is your opportunity to showcase yourself as a polished, insightful, capable professional who can conclusively demonstrate how a relationship with you and your company can help the decision maker achieve their business objectives, address key issues and implement priority strategies. As a matter of fact, a University of Minnesota study revealed that if you stand up and give a presentation your customer is 43 percent more likely to be persuaded and will be willing to pay 26 percent more money for the same product or service.

Let's take a closer look at the advantages of business presentations and why they are so powerful.

Effective, proactive presentations can help you:

- Earn the right to continue to work with senior-level management;
- Build momentum for your projects;
- Enhance your professional image;
- Take control of communication;
- Demonstrate your commitment and sincerity;
- Initiate a decisive environment; and
- Create a memorable event.

Executed properly, the presentation will:

- Increase customer satisfaction and loyalty
- Improve customer retention.
- Provide the elements to cultivate and grow the business relationship
- Sow the seeds of new opportunity for other products and services.

"The best way to predict the future…is to create it." That quote by an unknown source is what managing and growing account relationships is all about – creating the future with your customer. You're planting the concepts today that will help the business relationship flourish tomorrow. Making a presentation to senior-level management is not an alternative or back-up strategy – it's central to your primary strategy for managing and growing your account relationships.

Guidelines for Selling to Senior-Level Executives

These underlying guidelines will help you make the most of the presentation opportunity:

Guideline 1: Senior-level decision makers are more likely to maintain a value-oriented relationship with you and your company based on what you know about them and their business rather than what they know about you and your products. Their priority is making sure that the objectives of their company are being met, so you must continually demonstrate that your efforts support those objectives.

Guideline 2: You only get one chance to make a good first impression. But understand that you're only as effective as your last presentation, so make every one memorable.

Guideline 3: Ongoing access is critical. It's not enough to get to senior-level management once – you need to be so good that you get invited back. Getting to know your customer's business inside and out helps you focus on their issues. Furthermore, it enhances their perception of you – they'll see you as a business resource who can make an impact on those issues.

Guideline 4: The power of presentation always exceeds the power of a discussion or a document.

Guideline 5: Prove the business fit before the product fit. Again, remember, it was proving the business fit that got you in. As you continue to work with your customer, resist the urge to grow business by merely introducing them to new products or services. Keep proving the business fit and the business will grow itself.

Types of Presentations

There are three types of presentations that you can use depending upon your objectives:

The Business/Positioning presentation which can:

- Position a conceptual fit between your two organizations;
- Reposition your company;
- Change potential misperceptions;
- Position your company as a valuable resource;
- Solidify the next opportunity for presenting a specific solution or recommendation.

The Relationship Management presentation which can:

- Assist in the ongoing management of the relationship;
- Give your company credit for the value you bring;
- Reflect on the relationship;
- Expand the relationship;
- Resolve possible issues that may exist;
- Uncover additional opportunities and prioritize them;
- Make your projects the priority.

Use the Solution/Closing presentation to:

- Solidify the relationship;
- Present specific recommendations; and
- Close new business.

Cover All Your Bases

The following reviews the components in each of the presentations. What they have in common is a need for a dynamic cover page. It identifies the type of presentation you're making and should prominently feature your customer's logo. This will reinforce the tie between your two companies.

The Business/Positioning Presentation

The Business/Positioning presentation includes (See Figure 1):

- The presentation objectives, made up of three components:
  - A confirmation of your understanding of the customer's business;
  - A statement of your company's interest to position itself as a business resource to your customer.
  - A statement on how you want to develop, expand and strengthen your business relationship.
- The agenda, which lists the contents of the presentation including a customer overview, an overview of your business, the business fit and action steps/timetable.

Figure 1: Typical Agenda for the Business/Positioning Presentation

- [Customer]
  - A profile
  - Business objectives
  - Strategies
  - Business issues/challenges
  - Departmental issues
- [Company] – A Strategic Resource
- The [Customer/Company] business fit
- Action steps/timetable

It also includes:

- A customer overview, including a company profile (e.g. markets, products, unique positioning), business objectives, strategies, and business and departmental issues. It's important to put the customer first to minimize your chance of being perceived as a vendor.
- How your company is a strategic

resource – points that reinforce your credibility as a business resource, particularly as it relates to your current customer/company relationship.

- The business fit, which is phrased in the customer's terms. Describe the business fit and opportunities between your companies and how that fit can have an impact on the customer's key objectives, strategies and business issues.
- Action steps and timetable which state your specific recommendations and the commitments needed to carry them out.

The Relationship Management Presentation

In a Relationship Management presentation, your objectives include:

- Reconfirming your understanding of the customer's business and departmental environments.
- Providing an update on your company;
- Reviewing the customer relationship with your company, and
- Solidifying your mutual path forward.

Your agenda also changes (see Figure 2). This time it includes:

- A customer review, in which you reflect on what's new or has changed since the last time you presented.
- An update on your company as a strategic resource in which you highlight what's new and your track record of growth and success, including industry recognition or other key points that reinforce your credibility as a business resource. Choose the points in this part of the agenda based on what you think will be the most important and compelling to the customer.
- A review of your current business relationship. Some of the potential elements to explore might include background, history, relationship objectives, successes, challenges, observations, customer satisfaction and value assessment. Review projects and their objectives and other activities to date.
- Your business fit; reinforce its positive outcomes.
- Action steps and a timetable in which you will outline your specific recommendations and the commitments needed to carry them out, including specific dates that will help drive actions.

Figure 2: Typical Agenda for Relationship Management Presentation

- [Customer] – a review
- [Your Company] – a strategic resource – an update
- [Customer/Your Company] – the relationship
- [Customer/Your Company] – the business fit
- Recommendations
- Action steps/timetable

For U.S. Bank Corporate Payment Systems, this type of presentation has been key. Here's what Chad Wilkins, Senior Vice President of Corporate Payment Systems, has to say:

"The relationship management presentation is a natural build-up to doing all the other elements of account management right. If done effectively, it positions you as a strategic partner and forces the customer to see you in a different light. The outcome of this for us has been increased opportunities within our existing customer base. It's been a tremendous advantage for us and one that has prompted us to further our efforts with account management across all of our relationships."

The Solution/Closing Presentation

The solution/closing presentation has its own unique, and highly powerful, elements:

- Presentation objectives include a background review, a review summary of action steps and activities, a reconfirmation of the business fit, a review of company solutions, and how you want to solidify the relationship and close the presentation.
- The agenda includes a background review, action steps summary, success criteria, solution overview, customer/company solution fit, and actions steps and timetable. (See figure 3)

Figure 3: Typical Agenda for the Solution/Closing Presentation

- Background review
  - Business initiatives
  - Business issues
- [Customer/Company] – business fit
- Action steps and activities
- Success criteria
- [Company] solution overview
- Action steps/timetable

Figure 4: Presentation Delivery

Presentation Element	Presenter's Tone
Introduction	**Taking control** From the start, your tone should indicate that you are in charge.
Objectives and Agenda	**Prepared** The organization and detail of the objectives and agenda set the stage for a well-prepared presentation.
Customer Overview	**Humble** When you speak about the customer's business, be humble and make it clear that you are confirming, not informing.
Your Company Overview	**Confident** You know that your company has what this company needs, and your tone indicates that confidence.
Current Relationship Review	When you speak about the relationship your tone will change depending on what you are saying. The following blocks give examples.
Relationship History/ Background, Relationship Objectives, Projects, Activities to Date, Successes	**Enthusiastic**
Challenges and Constructive Observations	**Sensitive, Concerned**
Customer Satisfaction and Value Assessment	**Humble, Confirming, Enthusiastic** (if positive), **concerned** (if negative)
Business Fit	**Enthusiastic** Continue to indicate your belief in the business fit by your enthusiasm.
Action Steps	**Assertive** Go through the action steps confidently, indicating again that you are in control, and close the discussion.

- The background review is an overview of background covered in earlier presentations including a brief rundown of key initiatives, issues and the business fit.
- The action-steps summary is an overview of the action steps you established during your first presentation. In earlier presentations, you should have set success criteria, responsibilities and timetables; now you will review your outcomes.
- Decision or success criteria that you have uncovered which make this new solution successful in your customer's environment.
- An overview of the specific information about the solution you would like to present.
- The solution fit is a review of the customer's decision or success criteria. It highlights attributes of your solution and how they will address those criteria.
- Recommendations that are specifically aimed at closing the deal.
- Action steps that will close the deal.

This is your chance to get back in front of the decision maker and maintain the momentum you've built up while moving the process forward. Don't disappoint that decision maker at this stage of the game.

Once you have your presentations refined, it's time to perfect your delivery. Each section of the presentation must have its own tone to be effective. See figure 4 to know which approach to take at which stage of game.

In a Relationship Management presentation, it's especially important to change your tone depending what you're saying as you review the relationship between your companies.

For the Solution/Closing presentation, some components are delivered in the same or similar style as the first two. And when you get to the closing, the right tone is key. (See figure 5.)

Figure 5: Solution/Closing Presentation Delivery

Presentation Element	Presenter's Tone
Action Step Summary and Activity	**Confident**
Success Criteria	**Humble**
Solution Overview	**Confident**
Solution Fit	**Enthusiastic**
Recommendations/ Action Steps	**Assertive**

Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that delivery counts. He said, "What you are speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you say," Emerson was right. Here are some additional elements that are critical in delivering a polished presentation:

- Pace – move crisply through your presentation. Err on the side of caution and don't move too slowly. Rehearse your presentation so that you know the length of it and leave plenty of time for action steps.
- Handling questions – during your presentation, defer questions to the roundtable discussion afterward. During the roundtable, address any questions succinctly. Defer highly technical questions or those that require a detailed answer to a later time.
- Tone – as in the tone of your voice. Remember to tell a story through every page. Don't read your material. Your customer can do that perfectly well. Use your natural voice inflection and avoid a monotone delivery. Avoid using hesitating non-words like "um," "er," and "ah." By the same token, don't use extra words like "you know" or "like." Use silence to your advantage.

- Eye contact – Eye contact is considered one of the most potent ways of communicating sincerity. One study indicated that 38 percent of all meaning that an audience receives comes solely from eye contact with the presenter. In a small group, look to each individual. In a large group, look at individuals in sections. Focus on the decision maker.
- Body movement – Try to be smooth and natural in your movements and maintain good posture. Avoid fidgeting with small items like keys, pens and pointers. Be comfortable with the presentation medium you have selected. Avoid excessive or exaggerated gesturing.

No matter where you are in the process of growing your customer relationship, remember that ongoing, proactive business presentations give you the opportunity to plant the seeds for future success by talking about what's most important to you - the high level, long-term business solutions that you and your company offer. What's more, the decision makers get to listen to a presentation about what they care about most – solving the pressing business concerns that keep them tossing and turning at night.

Periodic, proactive business presentations are the most effective way to make your case to senior level decision makers for an ongoing business fit. With all of the tough issues you will face in managing and growing an account relationship, polishing and refining these presentations are critical to helping you effectively address those issues and cultivate a relationship that will help everyone savor the fruits of success.

Case Study: National Adhesives

Adhesives Sales Professional Proves Great Presentations Can Build Powerful Client Bonds

An Account Supervisor for National Adhesives, Judy Lewandowski was transfixed on winning back a major account that had left for a cheaper offering, but touting price and product just wasn't working. So she asked them about their production goals and objectives. Her contacts literally didn't know what to say, so they introduced her to someone who did – their production manager.

"The production manager was absolutely thrilled I was asking him about what was important to him and that I wanted to make his job easier," recalls Judy.

He complained about equipment that improperly applied the glue; the safety issues resulting from inadequate training and hot adhesives, and shipping preferences. What's more he eagerly gave Judy the names of other key players so she could get their perspective.

"He looked at me as someone who was there to help them – not sell them something," points out Judy. "He found my approach very refreshing."

After several hours of meetings, Judy had a clear view of the organization's goals and objectives and how adhesives could help achieve them. Moreover, she was now introduced to everyone on the management team and simply sent them an e-mail to set up a presentation meeting. At that point, her credibility was strong, but it would soon be rock solid.

She stood before them and presented her knowledge of their business issues and objectives based on what each of them had told her, shared how National Adhesives could respond to those issues and objectives – from specialized training to new equipment to low-temperature adhesives, and outlined specific steps to move forward together.

"I brought together ideas from each person in that room and I sensed their excitement about that," she notes.

Judy suspects that it was the only time this manufacturer had a comprehensive report on how the right adhesives could meet their company's objectives, especially considering the reaction of the plant manager – the key decision maker - who exclaimed, "You have a great understanding of our business – and you have it in more detail than we do!"

It's no wonder this adhesives sales professional is firmly stuck on the power of presentation. A deal that she unsuccessfully tried for years to win was closed in just five months!

Mark Shonka and Dan Kosch *are Co-Presidents of Impax Corporation, a leading sales performance improvement company. Together, they have more than 45 years experience in direct sales, sales management, and sales consulting and training. They are highly sought-after authorities on a range of sales topics including selling value, strategic account selling, strategic account management, territory sales, inside sales, and sales leadership. Their advice has empowered leading organizations like IBM, 3M, DuPont, Eli Lilly, D&B and AT&T to launch themselves beyond today's selling challenges and establish competitive differentiation. Shonka's and Kosch's expertise has been compiled in their book*, ***Beyond Selling Value****, published by Dearborn Trade; it was chosen from thousands to be placed among the top 40 business books of the year by Business Book Review. For more information, go to www.impaxcorp.com or call 1-800-457-4727.*

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