



Selling to the C-Suite

By Steve Lunz



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Huthwaite, Inc.

22630 Davis Drive, Suite 100

Sterling, VA 20164

703-467-3800

www.huthwaite.com

Selling to the C-Suite

Have you ever wondered why your superstar new hire salespeople have such a dismal record of getting into the C-Suite, belying the apparently outrageous claims of their resumes?

In this paper, I shall seek to set you free from the perennial search for the silver bullet. I shall seek to tell you the truth about selling to the C-Suite.

It must be said at the outset that there are genuine rock star sellers who seem to move easily through those hallowed halls. These are people who have a rare combination of intelligence, fortitude, charisma, talent and luck. If you are one of these rock stars, carry on. But if you are one of us mere mortals, read on and we shall explore the elusive phenomenon of C-Suite selling.

Background

According to the 2001 U.S. Census Bureau survey there are over 10 million non-retail sales representatives in the United States. As there is no listing for C-Level executive in the Census, let's estimate the number of C-level executives in the B2B selling world using the Global 2000 list of companies. If we estimate that the Global 2000 on average has five C-level executives (CEO, CFO, COO, CIO, President) and seven additional "close to C-level executives" (i.e., EVP Sales, SVP marketing, SVP HR, Divisional President, etc.) then we arrive at a total of approximately 24,000 senior executives for the entire pool of over 10 million U.S.-based salespeople to call on. Amazingly, that figure translates into 417 sales professionals for each C-level Executive (CLE). This paper will discuss what research has revealed the very few among those 417 sales professionals actually do to be different. (For the sake of brevity, we will label C-Level Executives as "CLEs" for the remainder of this white paper).

Not many CLEs want to spend much, if any, time with salespeople. A few years ago one of my very talented salespeople was able to secure a phone appointment with an SVP of Sales with a Fortune 1000 company. I joined her on the phone and at the beginning of the call this gentleman told me, "You know, Steve, I get two or three prospecting calls a day from people wanting to sell me something. I can guarantee you that I return no more than two of those calls per year. I want you to know that your rep, Nicola, was so compelling with her messages to me that she represents one of those two calls I'll return this year." This CLE receives approximately 500-700 prospecting calls a year, and actually sees only one or two salespeople!

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It certainly appears that getting the attention and obtaining an audience with a CLE is a daunting challenge. The odds are stacked against you as you—along with several hundred of your peers—attempt to garner attention from an increasingly guarded and fickle audience. As the pressure to grow revenue and sell consultative solutions increases, you can be certain that the managers and executives for whom you work will expect you to call higher in your client and prospect organizations. Therefore, the goal of this white paper is to help sellers and sales organizations increase their likelihood of success in gaining and optimizing an audience with a CLE. The three critical questions this white paper will explore are:

The odds are stacked against you as you—along with several hundred of your peers—attempt to garner attention from an increasingly guarded and fickle audience.

- How do you identify *when* a Senior Executive would be most receptive to your request for time?
- What is the most effective route to obtain an audience with a C-Level executive?
- How do you execute a meeting with a CLE in order to increase your chances for success?

When would a Senior Executive be most receptive to a salesperson?

What is the optimum time to gain an audience with a CLE? Unlike commodity-driven purchasing agents, CLEs rarely get up in the morning thinking about interacting with salespeople. So, what *do* they think about? They are hyper-focused on improving their results

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and employing strategies that will help their enterprises grow revenue, increase market share, counter a competitive threat, acquire new customers, increase customer loyalty and retention, bolster margins, decrease costs, manage risk, increase shareholder value, attract and retain skilled staff and improve workforce productivity. There is a huge variety of strategies that CLEs employ to improve in these aforementioned areas.

One thing is certain: if you can't clearly prove that what you are selling will help an executive improve in at least one of these areas, then you need not waste your time calling on the C-Suite. They don't want to see you. However, if you can show that your offering will enhance results in these key strategic areas, you are still in the game.

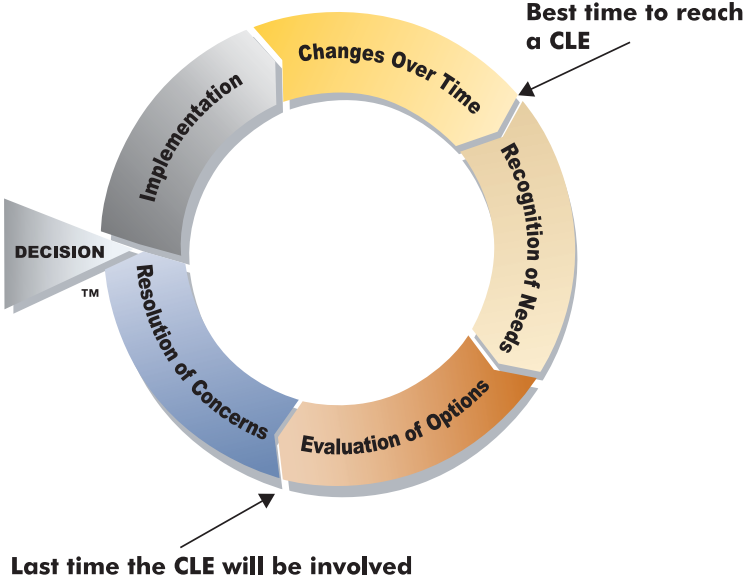
The maxim “timing is everything” is massively relevant to those in the sales profession. If you know when CLEs are likely to be engaged in making a major purchase decision, then your odds of being “at the right place at the right time” will increase dramatically. Huthwaite’s research into the predictable patterns through which buyers progress as they make a major purchase decision suggests that there are normally six ongoing phases of what we call the Buying Cycle:

- **Recognition of Needs:** During this phase the buyer moves from minor irritation to real dissatisfaction, and then finally to the point where he decides he’s going to do something about it.
- **Evaluation of Options:** This phase normally begins with a confusing array of choices and options. As it continues, the buyer becomes increasingly clear about the option that suits best. Finally, he settles on the best option.
- **Resolution of Concerns:** In this phase, although the buyer is sure he needs a change and has chosen the best option, he begins to deal psychologically with the risk inherent in a decision.
- **The Decision:** At this point, the buyer has resolved or come to terms with his concerns and signs on the dotted line.
- **Implementation:** This is the phase during which the new product or service is set up or brought on line.
- **Changes over Time:** This is the phase during which the initial problem is solved, desired outcomes are achieved and new challenges arise due to market forces, competition, etc.

Huthwaite’s research reveals that there are two critical junctures where CLEs are involved in the Buying Cycle and when CLEs have the highest probability of involvement:

- At the cusp between *Changes over Time* and *Recognition of Needs*, when the status quo is starting to unravel and new needs or problems are beginning to emerge (or early in *Recognition of Needs*, when minor irritations are beginning to develop into real dissatisfaction). This stage of the buying process concludes when the problem is understood and the buying team defines the outcomes they will expect from fixing the problem
- At the end of *Evaluation of Options*, when the CLE wants to make sure that the right decision on a vendor is made.

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Examining the two involvement points for CLEs in making a major purchase decision leads experienced sellers to an obvious conclusion: the optimum time to seek and gain entry into the world of the CLE is early in the buying process. If you don't engage the CLE at this point then the research shows that your chances of success lower dramatically.

There are two reasons behind this conclusion:

- CLEs value diagnosis significantly more than hearing about products, services and solutions. Lower level reports may care about your offerings and be willing to listen to pitches, but CLEs have no time for such activity. However, they will grant you time if you can truly help them diagnose a problem or challenge that is hindering their results.
- Since CLEs delegate the task of vetting potential solutions, if you missed the early opportunity, you will not be able to gain access to the CLE until the end of *Evaluation of Options*. You have unfortunately missed the opportunity to shape the problem or opportunity in your favor.

If you are not able to engage the CLE in *Recognition of Needs*, then welcome to “vendor purgatory” where the process, rules and access will be completely controlled by the buying team. You are now in the world of reactive selling where you and your competitors look shockingly similar to the buying committee.

Most Effective Route to Getting a CLE Audience

Two of the most effective methods for getting a meeting with a CLE are:

- **Have the executive call you and request a meeting.** This is admittedly said a bit tongue-in-cheek as the chances of this actually happening are extremely slim. But it does happen, however infrequently, and when it does you must be prepared to field this inquiry more professionally and strategically than your competitors.
- **Gain access through someone in the firm whom the CLE listens to and respects.** This is the most effective way to get time with a CLE. Cold calling a CLE, references from executives at other firms and targeted “VITO” letters may work. Sometimes. But the yield is so shockingly low that they may not be worth the effort.

So how do you gain access to CLEs using internal referrals? Aren't these people gatekeepers who try to shield the boss from such meetings? Not necessarily. Far too few salespeople understand when and how to request access to CLEs in a manner that will stack the deck in their favor. In fact, research conducted by Huthwaite determined that in strategic sales it is often advantageous to meet with the CLE's direct reports first before gaining access to the CLE. In other words, aim high, but not too high, initially.

Why is it advantageous to meet with the CLE's direct reports first? We are not talking about meeting with low-level administrators or individual contributors. If you are targeting the C-Level, their direct reports are at the Director and VP levels. These levels have detailed information that you should get from them in advance of a meeting with their boss, the CLE. Why? Since CLEs' schedules are so jammed and tightly guarded, everything that you can learn about their problems, challenges and the impact of not changing should be done, if possible, in advance of a meeting.

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We know that direct access to CLEs is extraordinarily limited. How do you gain access to their direct reports, the Directors and VPs who are responsible for executing their bosses' strategies? Well, let's first go back to timing. Rather than cast about and treat all prospects equally, your first step must be to identify the organizations where your solution is likely to help with a strategic challenge.

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The research shows that there are three focus points of an entry strategy:

The Focus of Receptivity—a person who's prepared to listen to you. This contact can be an excellent source of information and can help you gain access to others.

The Focus of Dissatisfaction—a person who is experiencing problems or difficulties with products or services for which you have a solution; or who may be willing to listen to an interesting opportunity.

The Focus of Power—a person who can make the final decision on a purchase.

When you are granted an audience with a Focus of Dissatisfaction (FOD) how do you succeed in leveraging that meeting to gain access to the C-Suite? First you must determine the stage of the Buying Cycle that the client is in. If the client is in late *Changes over Time*/early *Recognition of Needs*, you are in the diagnostic stage of the sales process. Your job is to determine the extent and depth of their problems/opportunities and why it is important to change their current situation. The absolute imperative at this point is to talk very little about your solutions and focus 90% of your discussion on the client's challenges and desired outcomes.

At the end of a meeting with the FOD, ask who would be involved in making a decision for change and what the process is for supporting a decision of this magnitude in the organization. Follow up that question, if necessary, to inquire about the funding. Never ask about the funding first. It makes you look like an amateur because you haven't yet earned the right. The process is equally, if not more important.

Most likely, by the time you have had discussions with the FOD, he has named his boss, the CLE, as the Focus of Power in the decision-making committee. If not, you must inquire—“Philip, you didn't mention Ann Bigcheese as part of the decision-making team. In my experience, while someone at her level is never involved in the details, they are almost always involved in the final selection and funding of an initiative of this magnitude. Is that true here at XYZ Company?”

Once you are able to confirm that Ms. Bigcheese is interested and involved you can make the move to request time with her. Here is how you can make this request in a way that will dramatically increase your chances of securing a meeting with Ms. Bigcheese.

The model for getting time with a CLE requires two key steps. First, you must create the willingness for your contact, the FOD, to see the strategic value of providing access to his boss. You must remember that this access is closely guarded and that entry is provided to a select few. In essence you must build trust with every interaction and prove that the meeting will be valuable and a good use of precious CLE time.

To accomplish this goal you have to invest time and resources to expand the FOD's understanding of his company's challenges and desired state. There are several methods you may employ including interviews, diagnostic tools, focus groups, needs assessments, etc. The key element is—you need to make your FOD look good in the eyes of his boss and be prepared to shed new insights on the company's strategy, opportunities and challenges. Be certain that there is some level of equanimity in the relationship. Your FOD should also invest time and provide access during this phase of the buying process.

Next, you must be able to clearly state the value and outcomes of a meeting with your FOD and Ms. Bigcheese. Be certain that you rehearse this request long before making the actual inquiry. The value of this meeting must be crystal clear to your FOD because you want him to make the request. Your chance of securing a meeting with a CLE increases exponentially when made by a trusted direct report.

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Finally you must be relentless and focused in order to build the trust and strategic value necessary to gain and maintain access to the CLE. There are three key reasons that your access to a CLE may be blocked:

1. Your sponsoring FOD is not held in high regard by the CLE. If this is the case, you have only one choice. You must find another FOD who has right level of respect and influence and can get you access to the CLE.
2. The buyer has moved beyond *Recognition of Needs* to *Evaluation of Options*. In this case your access will be blocked until the point of choosing a final vendor is imminent. C-Level executives aren't in the business of vetting potential suppliers. That is the domain of their employees. If you find yourself in this unenviable, yet very real, situation your strategy must be to differentiate at a level which allows you to make it to the finalist round in the selection process. At this juncture, the CLE will most likely re-insert himself in the decision process.
3. Your sponsor doesn't trust you. Now, it is very rare indeed that you will ever receive this feedback directly. You can bet that if a) your prospect is in *Recognition of Needs* and b) your sponsor has a positive relationship with the CLE and you are not granted access that trust is the real reason for this blockage. If this is the case, you will get a litany of excuses that are nothing more than smokescreens. At this point you must completely overhaul your strategy and determine how to provide new strategic value and insight to your FOD.

The C-Level Sales Interaction

Now that we’ve covered when and how to reach a CLE, let’s explore what you *must* do when meeting with a CLE that will dramatically increase your chances of success and keep the door open in the future.

The CLE call is unlike any other you make and you must be prepared at a level that goes far beyond ordinary call-planning. Here is the critical knowledge you must have in advance of this meeting, and some of the sources that provide this information.

Knowledge	Sources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall Business Strategy • Potential Problems and Opportunities 	<p>Information: 10K, Analyst Reports, Analyst Conference Calls, Web-based intelligence sources (Hoover’s, Lexis-Nexis, First Research, etc.)</p> <p>People: Focus of Receptivity, Focus of Dissatisfaction, Competitors</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of the most urgent problems/opportunities facing the CLE’s business • Implications of not solving problems or maximizing opportunities • The payoffs/outcomes from fixing problems and/or maximizing opportunities 	<p>People: Focus of Dissatisfaction</p>

If you do not have a clear and concise understanding of the information listed above, then you are not ready for a meeting with a CLE. Some experienced sales professionals may be a bit alarmed at this point and wonder why you would ever want to engage in a dialogue with direct reports first. Wouldn’t they just try to block access to the CLE? The simple answer is no, with a caveat. If the CLE’s direct reports are strategic and talented then they will not block you. If they aren’t strategic and talented, then you may not want to do business with this executive anyway. Since a CLE is rarely, if ever, intimately involved in the implementation of any solution, you will have to rely on his direct reports for a successful implementation. If they are not talented and capable you are in trouble. Better to know this information sooner rather than later.

Alright, you're invited to meet with CLE and three VPs next week. Is there a successful road map and agenda for this type of meeting? Yes, always. In the first three minutes of the meeting, you must impress everyone in the room, especially the CLE, or you're dead. It's over, finito. A solid, strategic agenda delivered with poise and confidence will ensure that you get off to a smashing start. Here is the agenda you should follow for a meeting when a CLE is in the *Recognition of Needs* phase of the Buying Cycle:

- ***Business Issues facing the company***
- ***Challenges/Opportunities***
- ***Your Diagnosis/insight***
- ***Capabilities to drive improvement***
- ***Solution components/expertise***
- ***Next steps***

The execution of this meeting is extraordinarily critical. Your Focus of Dissatisfaction should coach you on the development of key talking points, but he can't let you move significantly from the agenda laid out above. Why, because Huthwaite's research reveals that CLEs in *Recognition of Needs* want you to prove that you:

- Have done your homework
- Know the problems/opportunities facing their company
- Know the problems/opportunities facing their area/operation
- Can reveal something that they didn't know about their business (in a non-threatening manner)
- Have the capabilities to help the CLE execute his strategy
- Have done this before and are capable of doing it again

Success depends upon your ability to engage the CLE in a dialogue and gain additional insight and perspective that is resident only with and closely guarded by the CLE. Why do I say closely guarded? CLEs like to discuss success, results and strategy to drive more of the same. They do not like to discuss problems, implications and potential failure. If you arrive at this meeting ready to dig in and develop pain when this information was available through other sources (think Focus of Dissatisfaction), then you will most certainly not be asked to come back. However,

If you arrive and already know the problems and opportunities and the resultant impact of not changing, then you are in absolutely outstanding shape and undoubtedly far ahead of your competition.

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if you arrive and already know the problems and opportunities and the resultant impact of not changing, then you are in absolutely outstanding shape and undoubtedly far ahead of your competition. It is in this portion of the call that you highlight your knowledge of your prospect's problems/opportunities and can hopefully reveal something new, or shed a new light on something with which the CLE is familiar.

Your mission now is to ask the CLE to react to your diagnosis of the business—to affirm or refute the problems/challenges he faces and expand upon the impact of those problems/challenges. If you gain agreement in this area and more than one problem/challenge exists then you must ask the CLE to rank them in order of importance.

At this point, the CLE is confident that you know his business, you have developed a thorough understanding of the implications of not making any changes, and you have provided a non-threatening platform for the CLE to react to your diagnosis and add his extremely valuable perspective. Now we arrive at another critical juncture.

The next step in the meeting is to ask the CLE to describe the payoff and improvements he expects from fixing these problems and/or maximizing opportunities. The goal of these questions is to get the CLE to describe what improvement will do for his strategy and business. Always plan these questions in advance and be certain that they sound informed, positive and natural.

After you have uncovered the payoffs that the CLE would expect from addressing a problem/opportunity, the next step is to provide a brief overview describing your capabilities and how they would help the CLE attain his desired state. The goal is not to deliver a detailed proposal but to provide enough detail to:

- Demonstrate that you have the capabilities to help the CLE address a problem/opportunity and more effectively execute his strategy.
- Get some high-level feedback from the CLE that helps you develop and shape your solution proposal/presentation.

If you cover this much ground in your meeting, consider yourself the epitome of professionalism and success. The next question you need to ask relates to the process the company will follow in making a major purchase decision. The best way to posit this question is to be brief, direct and customer-focused. For example, you might ask, “in order to be sure that I'm working with your team in the most effective manner, would you please advise me on the process you normally follow when making strategic purchase decisions like this one?” The key is to get the CLE talking which allows you to ask additional questions so you obtain a clear understanding of the process.

Once you know the process, then the next and final step for this meeting is to understand how the prospect organization will go about the task of making a choice between competing vendors. In essence, you need to understand which differentiators will inform and guide the prospect's decision process. These differentiators, or decision criteria, will provide the insight necessary to lead your sales campaign to a successful conclusion.

This critical step is almost always ignored, even by some very experienced sellers. If you sell an offering that is not a routine purchase, then your buyer most likely doesn't have the requisite experience to make an intelligent, informed decision. In fact, you can be assured that the CLE and his team are quite concerned that they will make the wrong decision due to incorrect or incomplete criteria.

If time doesn't allow you to cover this critical topic with the CLE, then be certain to gather as much of this information as possible from the CLE's direct reports after the meeting and prepare to confirm and build upon what you've learned in the next meeting with the CLE.

Selling in the C-Suite is the most coveted of all selling opportunities. Please understand that if you take the steps outlined above, your chances for success at the C-Level improve dramatically. But there is no silver bullet. You must work hard and follow a process. Good luck!



With more than three decades of delivering client results, Huthwaite is the leading sales performance and change management firm. As pioneers in the application of behavioral research and analysis to improving sales effectiveness, we impart the skills and processes to drive lasting change and measurable business outcomes.

Building upon our prestigious research legacy, broad subject matter expertise and success-based sales models, Huthwaite's approach integrates implementation and training strategies to cultivate critical competence across the client enterprise. In short, we help clients diagnose challenges, define success, prepare for change, implement sales performance solutions and support ongoing improvement. By continually revisiting this process, we empower clients to adapt to changing markets, anticipate new needs and stay ahead of the competition.

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