

Ask the Expert: How to Land Big Clients

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When you've been selling to small companies, making the move to larger corporate sales is a significant leap. The sales process is more complex, with larger companies having a more involved approval processes, due to the number of decision- makers involved and often more stringent purchasing policies.

However, with a keen understanding of your target market and a sound strategy for "infiltrating" these companies, you can be successful in your efforts. The keys to success are focus, research, selling savvy and patience.

Set Realistic and Finite Goals

First, make sure you have a very solid sense of your company's strengths, especially as compared to the competition. Creativity alone will not make you a great resource for a new prospect. Collect all the positive testimonials you've received from past clients. If you don't have many, ask your clients for them. Most satisfied customers are delighted to say something positive about a company that's met or exceeded their needs.

Once you've refined the answer to the question, "What makes us better than other companies that do what we do?" put your answer to the test. Can your direct competitors make the same claim? If so, keep working on defining your unique selling proposition. Review your competitors' websites and selling materials. Look for that special customer need that only YOUR firm can meet.

Then, define your target market by making a short list of the companies you want to reach. If you have been working with very small organizations, you should set achievable goals for the next step up. Look for companies that are similar in some ways to the market you've been successfully serving. Try to find out who their current suppliers are and, as noted above, establish a very clear idea of how you are as good as, if not better, than the companies you are competing against.

Hold an internal team meeting to talk about the types of companies you want to reach. Find out if anyone at your company has contacts you can leverage. The Internet, industry publications and industry trade shows (and their directories) can be great sources of information about prospect companies. For example, if you want to sell to appliance companies, use business search engines and trade publications to find all the appliance manufacturers that meet your criteria. Then further segment this list, based on parameters that make sense for your business.

Selling in your local geographic area may be more practical, especially initially, because making face-to-face presentations is less costly and resource-intensive. Or, you might set company size as your criterion, aiming at those companies that are one or two revenue levels up from your current market.

Get Out There!

Although many small companies have a tough time getting staff out of the office for industry functions, this interaction with decision-makers can be essential in opening new doors. Find out which industry events are commonly attended by your prospects and make a point of being there. You don't need to exhibit at a trade show to have a presence. Attending conference sessions or social functions could give you great exposure too.

Make sure your company is listed in directories or Internet sources that your client prospects might consult when they are looking for your type of product design.

Cold Calling... Aim High

To save your company from the whirlpool of corporate bureaucracy, establish a very clear sense of your ideal "buyer" within a company. Unlike very small companies, where you can easily identify the decision-maker, larger companies are sometimes fraught with purchasing protocol. Start at the top.

I recommend calling prior to sending an e-mail or paper mailing. Once you've established your shortlist of prospects, contact the head of the companies you're targeting and simply ask the question, "Who is responsible for hiring the companies that do your product design and reviewing new design concepts?" If you can get that person on the phone and introduce yourself, fantastic! If not, direct a short introductory letter to your lead and

then follow up with a call. Although this is labor-intensive at the onset, you will be assured that your message is reaching the right prospect.

Staff Your Business Development Effort Properly

A great product designer can be a less-than-effective salesperson. Unless you have a person on your team who truly enjoys selling, consider outsourcing the sales function, perhaps even hiring a part-time staff member to help prospect and make preliminary calls. But be absolutely sure that person is well trained in your business, history, case studies and philosophies. Or simply limit his or her activity to prospecting and have any “warm” leads turned over immediately to a principal of your company.

Be Realistic

Landing that first big client might be tough. Give yourself a realistic timetable for closing the deal. Stay focused. Listen to feedback as to why your company may not be the right “fit.” Experiment with different prospects, approaches and sales techniques.

If you can afford it, consider engaging a consultant for help with your prospecting or sales strategy. Calculate how many sales you’d need to cover the cost, and measure progress carefully. And don’t be shy about making noise when you close a new deal or develop a new product. Make sure you send a press release to relevant trade publications and post your success on your website. Larger companies are sure to check you out before they hire you. They’ll want to know you have a track record with companies of their size. In no time, you’ll be building on your successes and have more confidence and case studies to continue to “step up” to the next level of sales.

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