

“As a specialist IT lawyer with over 40 years’ experience both in private practice and in-house, I have acted for IT businesses from start-ups to large multi-nationals. I have seen the very best and the very worst of sales performances. In Jim’s book I have found countless echoes of my own experiences and commercial encounters. I found myself nodding in agreement on almost every page. This book will be of great value to any salesperson at any stage of their careers - excellent advice for the beginner, and a timely aide-memoire for the experienced. I commend it.”

Paul Klinger LLB, Solicitor. Former Director of Legal Services, EMEA, at Silicon Graphics, Inc.

The B2B Selling Guidebook

Powerful tips, techniques and tools to help you succeed in Business-to-Business (B2B) selling – based on over 40 years of real-world experience, testing and on-the-job research.

Jim Irving

The B2B Selling Guidebook

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Compendium

noun /kəm'pen.di.əm/

A detailed collection of information on a particular subject, especially in a short book...

Source: MacMillan Dictionary



About the Author

Jim was born in Edinburgh, Scotland and now lives in rural Northern Ireland with his wife, Yvonne. He has spent over 43 years in Business to Business (B2B) selling with a number of industry leading technology organisations including Amdahl, Sequent, Silicon Graphics (SGI) and Information Builders (www.ibi.com).

His career started with the hardest possible assignment - selling office equipment door to door in Scotland, in the depths of winter! His career rapidly developed into senior selling and sales leadership roles then ultimately to senior executive positions at major multinationals - including becoming the UK MD of Information Builders - a leading US based enterprise software company. At Silicon Graphics he was awarded the Corporation's 'Exemplary Leader' award. Jim has also held several executive marketing posts. For the last 14 years he has run his own consulting business helping start-ups to improve their B2B strategy and selling results. He has advised and helped many start-ups to better execute and grow their businesses.

Jim has travelled extensively and worked worldwide. He gained an MBA from Edinburgh Napier University in 1988. He is a Fellow of both the Chartered Institute of Marketing and The Institute of Sales Management. He has spoken at a number of seminars and conferences and has in the past been an occasional visiting lecturer to both the MBA school at Edinburgh Napier University and to the Postgraduate Business School at Queens University, Belfast.

When not working, Jim enjoys dining out, family time, the gym, travel, reading fiction and following current affairs.

“The selling process offers a peep-hole into the human condition. In this book, Jim helps the sales person see reality, develop insights and then, most of all, add long-term value to the client-supplier relationship.”

Bob Bishop, Former Chairman & CEO, Silicon Graphics Inc.

“Jim’s reputation is very well established. He has gone in to lead sales/the business in difficult circumstances and markets and has delivered clarity in strategy and also in sales execution and improved results. He understands the dynamics of selling.”

Professor Paul Atkinson, Founding Partner - Par Equity (a multi award winning VC firm), Executive Chairman Taranata Group and serial investor.

“His no-frills, straightforward and ethical approach to building a world-class sales organization is something to this day that I not only admire, but also strive to emulate.”

David Rode, Former Senior Vice President, International Operations, Information Builders Inc. (IBI)

“I first met Jim when I asked him to be the MD of a technology company I chaired. He brought clarity and strong execution to the business and massively increased market visibility while improving business results and motivating staff. He delivers very strong sales and communication skills to every endeavour”

Michael Black MBE, Successful technology entrepreneur. Non-Executive Director at Danske Bank, Non-Executive Director at Titan IC Systems and Chairman – Displaynote Technologies

“Jim is one of those few people who has a real presence... This credible presence and his great persuading and influencing skills are invaluable when communicating at the highest levels within the organisation...”

Chief Data Officer, UK Top 3 FTSE Company

“A key objective for any company is revenue growth. Jim Irving is one of the select band of individuals with a long track record of making a real difference where it matters most - the bottom line.”

Jim Green, CEO and Co-Founder, Spartan Solutions

“As a specialist IT lawyer with over 40 years’ experience both in private practice and in-house, I have acted for IT businesses from start-ups to large multi-nationals. I have seen the very best and the very worst of sales performances. In Jim’s book I have found countless echoes of my own experiences and commercial encounters. I found myself nodding in agreement on almost every page. This book will be of great value to any salesperson at any stage of their careers - excellent advice for the beginner, and a timely aide-memoire for the experienced. I commend it.”

Paul Klinger LLB, Solicitor. Former Director of Legal Services, EMEA, at Silicon Graphics, Inc.

“The most difficult challenge in business is to make simplicity out of complexity. Jim is one of those few who can make any process seem simple. His methodical and diligent approach to the sales process and every sales cycle is why he has seen and passed on so much success.”

Ryan McAnlis, Former CEO, JAR Technologies

“Jim is a natural sales leader, able to instantly command attention and respect from both his sales team and prospective clients. He has a relaxed and friendly approach which puts customers at ease and gains their trust. This, coupled with a keen commercial drive, enables him to identify opportunity, develop winning sales arguments and effectively manage the sales process to ensure his team make their numbers.”

Ian Baxter, Vice President - NetDimensions

“Jim is a seasoned sales leader with a proven track record of success in multiple channels and business models. His leadership and motivation skills elevate the productivity of his teams resulting in consistently exceeded goals. He is respected by his customers, team, peers, and senior management.”

Greg Goelz, President & CEO, Smart Locus Inc, California

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Chapter

1

Service Led Selling

“Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

Harold R McAlindon



Introduction

I was recently in the market for a new car – just a small ‘run around’ to replace a larger, older and less efficient car – doing my bit for the planet. I looked at three options which were all very close in specification. In each case I took a test drive and then said I would think about it. All three salesmen (and in this case they were all men) seemed professional and competent. I was a real buyer... I had cash and motive... I was really interested in their products and told them so... Now five months on, not one has followed up to see what I was doing. Such a shame and also such a lost opportunity for each of them. If just one had followed up and truly been interested, they would almost certainly have their commission now. Has that happened to you in your personal life? How do you feel when a salesperson lets you down? This ‘poor service – v - fantastic service’ feeling in a customer can be enormously useful to you in B2B selling. The simple fact is that salespeople often commit and promise to do, more than they actually deliver. A lot is said, but less is done...

An Example

I was trying to break into a critical target account in Manufacturing. I was, as we all often are, hitting my head against the proverbial brick wall. Nothing seemed to have been working. But I had obviously done just enough to get noticed as I was then invited to compete with their incumbent supplier for the next large deal, which was really important to their business success – a truly strategic procurement for the customer. I had built an effective network of friends and contacts, both in the sector and in the local market and I heard through my grapevine that the incumbent supplier was totally unconcerned about our presence. They had a multi-year joint history, a great ongoing working relationship, good technology and a couple of staff deeply embedded (full time) with the customer. Thinking back, I guess if I was them, I would have been pretty confident too!

I racked my brains but could not think of any traditional way to win the deal and the customer relationship going forward. Then I decided I would try what I later termed ‘Service Led Selling.’ (Note: not Services Led, which is another thing entirely...) It was an initial, fairly unscientific attempt to win over the customer by contrasting their experience with us and with their incumbent. Luckily the prospect was a large, traditional organisation with a methodical approach to the buying process and with a lot of their people wanting answers to a large number of questions.

The tactic was very simple. We cleared a whiteboard in the office and I and the pre-sales team agreed a headline which read... *“Every request will be answered the same day”*. As the questions flowed in, we ‘crawled over broken glass’ to ensure that, no matter how difficult, we always got at least the basis of an answer back to them before midnight that same day. And we openly and honestly answered every question. When we simply didn’t know the answer AND couldn’t get it before the end of the day we still responded, explained what we did know, what action we had taken to answer their question and when we would be back to them with a definitive answer. We recorded them all on the whiteboard to ensure none were missed. It was HARD work for everyone. At one point we even figured out that the customer had perhaps guessed what we were trying to do as a lot of difficult questions seemed to come in around 5pm! But we persevered. We did this without fail throughout the length of the four to five-month campaign. Of course, at the same time we were doing our traditional sales job - needs analysis, problem solving, running presentations, speaking to their technical staff and executives and building our proposal - all the normal big-ticket sales activities. (BTW, have a look at chapter 16 for some thoughts on leading a team from the front internally).

On decision day we found that we had won the deal - and the account - outright. The incumbent was beyond

shocked. One of their flagship accounts was gone and they just couldn't figure out how it had happened. Had they perhaps taken their customer too much for granted? Over time as we got to know our new customer, we kept on hearing the same phrase – *“From the beginning we just felt we could trust you more to deliver this critical project”*. The constant drip, drip, drip of us responding quickly, fully, honestly and effectively to every request, compared with the normal approach from a big vendor – answering questions in a few days or so, not answering everything fully (particularly if a truthful answer didn't look good), sometimes completely missing out the answers that were not positive – had created a powerful impression and impact. Psychology talks about the fact that 'negativity bias' (your bad feelings towards something caused through bad experience) is actually stronger than the equivalent 'positivity bias'. So, if one vendor is constantly reinforcing a negative experience and the other is reinforcing positive actions and attitude, then you subconsciously start to see a big gap between them. But, putting aside the psychology theory, all I know is that it worked very well for me!

I would love to be able to say that I have done this religiously on every major deal since then, but that just wouldn't be anywhere near true. HOWEVER, on those once in a while, highest-level, critical deals AND assuming you have a team that will truly agree with the idea and actively support you, this tactic can have an amazing impact on the customer relationship and trust.

The Lesson

Hard work pays off. Hard, consistent, detailed work pays even better... If all else is equal, then being a more responsive supplier, with a more open attitude, greater consistency and a much faster response time will directly, although subliminally, impact on the individuals you deal with. They will 'just feel' you are a better bet for them. Put simply, if you continue to do the right things, then the right things will happen. A warning however, you can't ever 'half

do' this. Starting out to work in this way and then dropping off your effort will have the exact opposite effect; they will become increasingly disappointed in you. *"We thought at first you were better than that..."* James Muir describes selling as *"A sample of how you solve..."* and that is what we are doing here. Service Led Selling is a fantastic tool to keep up your sleeve for when it's needed...

"Once you have the commitment, you need the discipline and hard work to get you there."

Haile Gebrselassie

Chapter

2

Selling Strategically 'Outside the Box'

“Those who let things happen usually lose to those who make things happen.”

Dave Weinbaum



Introduction

You have a massive opportunity in your pipeline. You are excited about it. Winning it could make your year! But losing it would massively impact your chances of meeting your target. You already know who your core contacts are and who you still have to target, you also know what the end solution is likely to look like. We have all been there. So, what else can you do to impact your chances of winning?

The concept of selling strategically means, in a very real sense, looking outside of your own 'box.'

An Example

I was selling into what was then the largest potential deal of my career (seven figures, many years ago). I was one of four potential providers for just half of what the prospective customer needed to buy. Neither my company, or our three competitors, delivered any solutions in the other half (we four were all high-end enterprise hardware B2B vendors, the other element of the deal was complex enterprise software which none of us sold). The healthcare organisation – a massive, highly regarded and VERY professional buyer – had decided to choose their software first, then to look at the hardware after. Those of us that they had shortlisted for the hardware element were all told to wait until we were contacted.

On reflection, I decided to take a gamble and run a full sales campaign to all of the shortlisted software vendors. It turned out, by coincidence, there were four of them too, selling not in competition, but in parallel to the hardware vendors like us. We were not a threat or danger to each other. I reached out and made contact with each of them, sold their sales bid team our offering and its unique and how it could help them, found mutual references that had already worked well – anywhere in the world – got quotes from those joint customers and even organised calls with them if the software supplier agreed. This was not easy; it

took a lot of time and effort and I was criticised internally for “*Wasting time outside the sale*”. I soon realised that I was the only hardware supplier taking this approach, so I doubled down again. In effect, I wanted to get a ‘sale’ from each of the other players in the game that I could influence. They needed to know how working with us could aid their own sales campaigns...

Come the day that the RFP said we were to be contacted by the end user organisation I duly received a call. I was up against a very strong, leading incumbent and two other major industry players and was still not sure we really had a chance (we were, by far, the smallest bidder). My primary contact started laughing as she spoke to me... She said “*Well, we knew you had some reasonable technology, but we absolutely didn’t expect every one of the software vendors to recommend you specifically in their proposals. Would you like to come in before the other hardware vendors - including the incumbent - to move things forward?*” You don’t have to guess my answer! And three months later not only did I win the deal, which was even bigger than anticipated, but the mutual trust level from the process was by then so high they asked me if I would help them to source and then negotiate another large piece of technology for them (not directly linked to the original project). I dealt with those prospective vendors as the customer’s buying agent and that deal also passed through our books with some ‘rather pleasant’ profit margin attached. I had stumbled on additional, hidden value in this deal. A mutually beneficial long-term relationship then ensued. All because of that first ‘outside of the box’ thinking. Those software vendors had acted as my partners and that collaborative approach worked well.

The Lesson

Here, the message was very clear to me. As you look at those big, strategic deals, ALWAYS look to see who else could be involved in any way – other connected (non-competing) vendors, existing suppliers, external influencers, consultants, advisors, the end users/ consumers of what you deliver inside the organisation themselves. Then sit down and work out how you could reach them, influence them and, at the very worst, ensure they are neutral to what you will be doing. If you can find synergy or mutual benefit, then so much the better for both parties. I have used this approach on every critical deal I have been bidding for since then. Does it always work? Of course not. But does it increase your chances of winning – yes, every time.

“Your mind is the fuel, but creative thinking will really get you flying.”

Roni Rosenthal