

Break down brick walls



Steve Hoyle looks at how you progress when you find yourself up against a mid-level 'Brick Wall' manager who is determined to block the way to the top

Probably the question that I get asked more than any other from salespeople is: "How do I get past the mid-level technical manager who is blocking my access to the real decision makers?"

For example, in the IT infrastructure world this is often the IT manager, or in telecoms the telecoms manager who is not allowing access to the IT director, finance director and so on. We call the individual who is blocking you the Brick Wall, and salespeople often refer to how they can go around, over or smash through this wall.

Gaining access to the true decision makers or ratifiers/approvers is

obviously beneficial, but all good salespeople are very clear about why they want to get this access, and if they were to get a meeting, what they would say. Conversely, some salespeople believe that they should get as high as possible, don't really understand what they are trying to achieve at executive level, and then use lack of access as an excuse when they don't win business. We shall return to what you might want to talk to executives about later, but for now let's assume that there is a very good reason to want to get beyond your current mid-level management contact, who is blocking you.

There is a very old joke about a

driver asking a local for directions, with the answer being: "Well, I wouldn't start from here." My first answer to the question posed by the salesperson who is getting blocked, is the same – I wouldn't start from where you are today. The fact that you are being blocked is a result of you not doing things earlier in the sales process.

The situation may not be irretrievable, but you have certainly made it a lot more difficult for yourself by first, not having got around the issue earlier, and second, having your contact state, explicitly or at least in their own perception, that they do not want you to 'go around them'.



“That you are blocked is a result of you not doing things earlier in the sales process”

may be more difficult entries, but give you much better results once you have uncovered or created the opportunity? Have you tried targeting the IT director/CIO with a message about long-term strategy? Or the finance director/ CFO with examples of significant cost savings? Or maybe the marketing director/CMO to discuss issues about ease of access to and reliability of websites?

It may not always be possible to enter using these routes, and in all cases it is probably going to be more difficult than simply phoning up the IT manager and saying, “Have you got an interest in...?” However if you can achieve more entries through these higher-level approaches, your rate of success later in the process will be much higher. It is always easier to get referred downwards to the technical recommender,

than up to the eventual decision maker or ratifier.

If it is truly impossible to enter at a higher level, and in cases where you are responding to requests from the mid-level manager, then another tactic that can be applied is the so-called hunting licence.

This has to be carried out very early in the process, probably at the first meeting, when you agree with the contact that to propose a solution that best meets their needs it will be necessary to talk with a number of people including users, technical experts, people involved with supporting the solution and of course senior managers to understand the strategic framework/environment/ constraints/context in which the solution fits.

Gaining agreement to the hunting licence early is the key, and there can be few arguments about why these meetings would not be sensible or beneficial to the customer, if it is done very early and before the discussion become more serious and the contact has an established position. This tactic also has many other benefits – by spreading your contact group wider you will discover more about the situation, gain some friends along the way, understand the political situation better, and genuinely be able to propose a better, more appropriate solution, as well as gaining access to decision makers.

A second strategy that can be adopted in some situations is the ‘second seam’ by which we mean opening up (or perhaps resurrecting) other projects in different parts of the customer’s business. To do this will require different contacts and probably different propositions, or perhaps just a different person – for example, getting your sales manager to call one of her long term contacts in the account. This, however, should be done as early as possible after the initial enquiry, and should not be perceived as a direct attack on the Brick Wall.

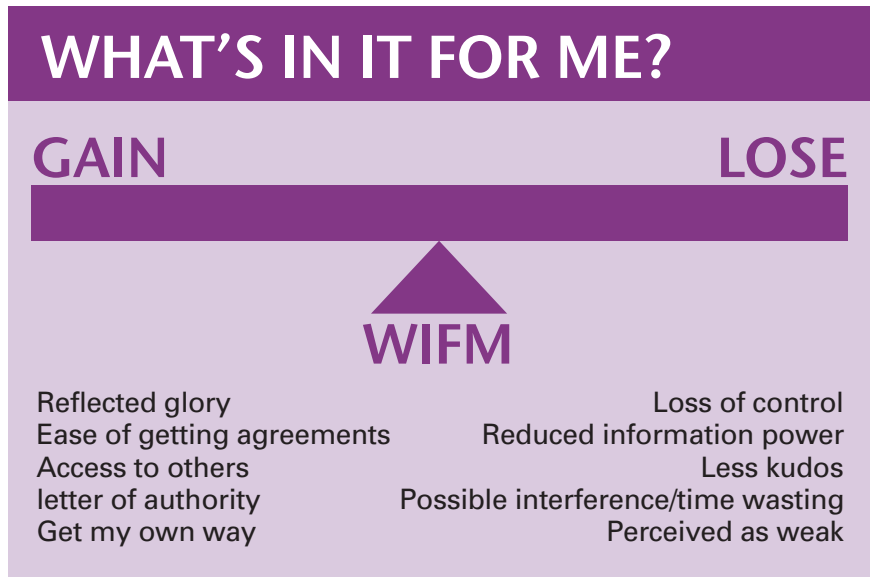
If you have arrived late into the project, are having to respond to a request from the mid-level manager, and have for some reason not been able to gain a hunting licence early, then you really are in the position of facing the Brick Wall – and this is when you need to find a way around, over or through them.

But even this language is not particularly helpful, and even if you end up going around them, thinking about the Brick Wall as a problem to be overcome is not tremendously positive, whereas looking on this as an opportunity may open up all kinds of other possibilities.

The initial question to ask yourself when facing a Brick Wall is have you actually asked if you can go beyond them. It may appear to be too easy, but in a recent assignment with a client I discovered that over half the reported cases of facing a Brick Wall were simply the salesperson’s perception – they had not asked because they imagined that they

Going beyond the Brick Wall is first about planning and managing the whole sales campaign. It is going to be far easier to manage the situation so that you don’t come up against the Brick Wall than trying to deal with this difficult situation. Managing this issue is best done either at the very start of the campaign, or very near the start.

If the sales opportunity is a result of your proactive endeavours (ie. you created or discovered the opportunity) then the first thing to question is what we call your entry strategy. Targeting the mid-level technical manager may be appropriate, but have you examined other entry points? Let’s say that you are selling IT infrastructure and the IT manager is your normal route into an account. Have you tried other routes, which



would get a negative response. In fact, in the majority of cases, going back with a reasonable request was met with acceptance by the perceived Brick Wall.

Of course, tactically how you frame the question is important, and again we often forget that this is just another selling exercise, where the 'order' is an agreement for you to meet with someone more senior. As a selling exercise the prospect (Brick Wall) is simply asking himself: "What's in it for me?" In other words, he's balancing the perceived benefits of allowing you to go higher against the perceived costs.

Just as in any selling situation, we will be attempting to add to the 'gain' list while at the same time reducing the impact of the 'lose' list. One way of doing this will be to minimise the lack of control by suggesting a joint approach to the more senior contact, or offering to give a full report on the discussions after any contact – all designed to allow the Brick Wall to perceive that they are remaining in control of the situation.

If for whatever reason you failed to get higher level contacts early in the process, and all your attempts at selling the benefits (for the Brick Wall) of a more senior level meeting have failed, then there are a number of other strategies that you could adopt.

SMASH THROUGH Going straight to the Brick Wall's boss is an option, provided that you have a strong enough business and personal

proposition that the boss will be interested in, and you are prepared to live with the consequences of alienating the Brick Wall. There are circumstances where smashing through is the most appropriate and the only effective strategy. For example when selling a true outsourced managed service remember that in the UK, turkeys don't vote for Christmas (in the US they don't vote for Thanksgiving); ie. a mid-level technical manager is rarely going to champion having his department outsourced, but the proposition to the COO or CFO may be extremely attractive – but they are the only ones who will see the advantage.

GO-AROUND In this strategy, you find some unrelated reason to talk to the more senior executive, and a good go-around approach will involve somebody else from your company. For example your sales VP could contact the CIO independently to discuss industry trends, or the VP of manufacturing may get invited by your marketing department to attend a seminar.

SIDE-STEP This is a variation on the go-around strategy, and one that you need to adopt either before the Brick Wall has blocked you, or occasionally when the Brick Wall is not available, for example when they are on holiday. The strategy is to find some small matter that would naturally fall to the more senior manager, and to approach them directly on this and this matter only. Obviously once contact is established you will allow

them to move the conversation on. You will normally immediately inform the Brick Wall, to allow them to feel in control, and to head off a very difficult situation should they subsequently find out without you having told them. An example of a side-step is going to the finance director with a request to understand what method the organisation usually employs for calculating return on investment, so that you can mirror their preferred methods in your proposals.

TRAVERSE AND UP In this strategy you do not try to get directly to the more senior executive, but you plot a route that initially has you going sideways or even downwards in the organisation to find someone who can sponsor you upwards. As an example:

- The Brick Wall agrees to you meeting with users in marketing to discuss the functionality of a solution
- A marketing user agrees to sponsor you into the marketing VP to discuss how new and emerging technologies can really boost effectiveness
- The marketing VP suggests that you meet with the CFO to further the discussions.

The above are fairly obvious and well-used strategies. The art of higher level selling is in choosing and refining the best strategies to suit your particular situation, and then executing them exceptionally well.

It is not always possible to get past a Brick Wall who is blocking you. To switch analogies, the best mountaineers are not those who make crazy decisions to continue onwards when there is very little chance of success. Although you will take well-calculated risks, it is also sensible sometimes to withdraw and qualify out of the deal if you know that it is going to take a lot of energy and resource, with the chances of success being very slim.

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