



BEST PRACTICES – ACCOUNT PENETRATION

IDENTIFYING & UNDERSTANDING THE BUYING INFLUENCES

BELLWETHER FOOD GROUP, Inc.

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The ability to penetrate a customer or prospect's organization is a competence a skill which is becoming increasingly important. If your sales team has this skill and can execute this effectively, we believe this can provide a unique competitive advantage.

We think about account penetration and networking as functional skills-they do play a role in relative success or failure. Here's why. The reality today for the manufacturers who supply the chain operators and the distributors is that three things have changed dramatically over the past 3-5 years:

- The real decisions, especially with the chain operators, regardless of their size, are not made much higher in the organization than ever before, usually in the "C" suite
- Most manufacturers don't make further penetrating customer organizations a priority. Few view this capability as important. Yet, in this changed and challenging environment the need for a cross section of perspectives and insights is critical
- Even those that do decide that further penetrating the buying influences within an important customer organization have no methodical, rigorous process to utilize when the need arises.

Further penetrating existing customers or any organization for that matter is simply a form of networking. Let's be clear about this--it is not luck, it is work. Of course, some people are better at it than others, and some people enjoy and others abhor it. A subset of that process is reaching to and connecting with people you've never met before or cold calling.

For the customers that are the most important to your business, you need to have multiple contacts and accessibility inside the organization. Certainly, you have to set priorities effectively, to ensure that you invest in this work with the right accounts.

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Not every customer warrants this type of investment. For those that do, you need multiple contacts and data points-no one person has all the answers or the needed insight to help you direct your energies and investments.

The first step is to map out, then begin working to identify and understand the buying influences. The next step is to understand the relationship gaps.

The Buying Influences

When we think about the buying influences, we use at least four distinctions-Gate Keeper, Technical Buyer, User Buying, Economic Buyer and Internal/External Coach. These all play a role, which evolves and flows over time and by initiative.

- **Gate Keeper**-typically this is the purchasing function, usually at the agent, manager or director level. There are exceptions, yet in many cases, they are there only to analyze and organization the information and the options based on priorities someone else has set. Unfortunately, there are still some sales people who get stuck here
- **Technical**-This role is played most often by menu development and operations. This is where the right sensory and qualitative characteristics are evaluated, combined with efficacy. Of course, at this level their primary role is to screen the products that don't fit so they will look for the imperfections and flaws-that's their job
- **User**-the real world users, the restaurant operators, the chefs, and the wait staff, etc. Their votes are important, especially if an initiative makes their jobs easier or more difficult. The feedback can be structured or not, formal or otherwise. If there is a problem, and the negative buzz gets traction, it doesn't really matter how it started
- **Economic**-the ultimate decision point and one that can veto many of the other votes on any initiative. This is usually the President, CEO or Chairman. Their primary concern is the overall direction and success of the business. As the final decision maker, they have a lot at stake, especially if a new initiative fails. The failure is one thing, the fact the organization has invested in something that hasn't worked out, the resulting fatigue and emotional letdown can be a drain on the entire organization. Of course, a big win helps all concerned
- **Internal Coach**-this role is played by someone in the organization who is not necessarily involved in the actual purchasing or menu decision process, but has information and insights that are helpful to your cause. This role may influence or not, but the real value is their understanding of the priorities, the players, and how things really get done. Many suppliers don't recognize or take advantage of this. Those who do have an advantage.

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- External Coach-outside the organization, these individuals are former employees of the company, maybe franchisees or other vendors. Each has a perspective that can help you understand the priorities, the personalities, past patterns and their individual perspective. Use what works and is consistent with your other data points.

There are many ways to get connected to these influences, especially those that aren't really involved with product or vendor decisions. On that subject, keep in mind, just because they don't actually influence the process doesn't mean their view won't add value. We recommend always considering every perspective, you can make the decision how much to value the insights, but certainly access them and take advantage of them when you can.

A great place to get some of those insights is the annual conference or convention. Many of these people are at those events, and much more accessible than during the regular work day. For the franchisees simply visit their restaurants-that's where they live!

The Tactics

The elements of networking include: cold calling, needs assessment interviews, maintaining connections, and using all your resources for getting as much information and insight as possible. To gain this accessibility you first need some cultural currency-something to ask them about their business that demonstrates you know something about their business!

Some ways to do that are:

- If it is a publicly traded company-Listen in on the quarterly calls or better yet, plan a question to ask during the call
- Ask an informed question about their restaurants, their growth plans, or the overall direction of the menu (most of these insights you can get from visiting their restaurants)
- Use what you can find out on your own, using publicly available information about their competitive set and how they see their competition (they always have a perspective about their competition)

Challenges

One of the first challenges we see with our manufacturing clients' sales teams is that many are reluctant to reach out to or try to contact those they have never met before-beyond the functions they are already comfortable with--usually purchasing and menu/product development.

Often times, sales people are uncomfortable for one of four reasons:

1. They don't know who these other influencers are

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2. They lack any thoughts or strategy about how to connect with them if they did know who they were
3. Previous attempts have been unsuccessful
4. Their current contacts, usually purchasing, have either directly or indirectly intimidated that it is in the sales person's best interests to not talk to anyone else in the organization-otherwise trouble will follow for them

If your sales team is dealing with number 3, then you have problems that can't be addressed in a short article! If you want to give us a call, we will happily talk through some ways to begin to get around those gatekeepers.

Avoiding the Bias Trap

When you begin to get truly connected to and understanding how these organizations really work and make decisions, then you can begin to identify and avoid two common traps suppliers get into.

We frequently see two types of bias patterns in sales process generally. Yet these biases can be great hindrances overall to sales and business development for any organization.

- Availability Bias--the tendency to over value the most available information, contacts, or solutions. For example, if the primary contact is only with purchasing, then the sales person may over value that particular perspective because it is the most available. Absent access to the other buying influences and their perspectives, this becomes a risk
- Confirmation Bias--confirmation bias is the habit of over valuing information and insights which confirm a specific strategy, course of action, or overall approach which align with the way you want it to be or think it should be

It's always interesting to see a sales person, manager or senior executive express frustration about the lack of VP or C level contacts inside their customer organizations. Yet, often times these are the same people who spend no time or energy encouraging their sales teams to do this work. Rarely are there ever any serious, sustained efforts made to connect with key influencers inside customer organizations, yet that is where the real power is.

To get any better at developing, establishing and sustaining the critical C level and VP relationships that you need, you have to make it a priority and then work at it. It takes time, energy and a consistent focus.

Founded in 2007, Bellwether Food Group is best known for our Restaurant Brand Architecture work for Chain Restaurants, growth strategy and professional sales skill development work for manufacturers, and pre acquisition due diligence work for private equity firms who invest in those industries.

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"Silent Selling, Listening for The Sounds of Success", is Mac Brand's book describing our unique approach to sales. We also provide comprehensive sales skills development tools and exercises. See more on our website: www.bellwetherfoodgroup.com

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