



BEST PRACTICES

IDENTIFYING & UNDERSTANDING THE BUYING INFLUENCES

BELLWETHER FOOD GROUP, Inc.

November 2016

The ability to penetrate a customer or prospect's organization is a competence; an essential skill which is becoming increasingly important in this mature chain restaurant market. It's a share capture battle for the chain operators and has been for at least 5 years. If the members of your sales team have this skill and can execute effectively, you have a unique competitive advantage. Simply, this means better accessibility, so you have better information, which helps you make smarter decisions about how much and what kind of support to provide.

We live in a marketplace where account penetration and networking are essential functional skills. These skills, or competencies, play an essential role in relative success or failure. Here's why - access to critical insights and information. You can't expect to strongly influence customer's business decisions - that's unrealistic. But you CAN have better information and visibility, which will help you to understand the priorities. Armed with this valuable information and visibility, you can develop more relevant recommendations. With this in mind, you must consider three things:

- The real decisions inside chain operators, regardless of their size, are made much higher in the organization than ever before, usually in the "C" suite. That's not to suggest that the functional influences aren't important - they are - but those people don't set overall strategy and priorities
- Most manufacturers don't make deeper penetration of customer organizations a priority. They will talk about the need for better penetration, but when it comes to really investing in it or working on it, it just doesn't happen. There always seems to be a meeting to attend, another crisis to deal with, etc. Yet, in this environment, the need for a cross section of perspectives, connections, and access to the power structure inside key customer organizations is critical
- The real challenge is that most of the manufacturers working with the chain restaurant companies lack any methodical, rigorous process to utilize as a regular practice to understand how these organizations really make decisions. There are a number of well-known tracking systems (commonly known as CRM) which have a role to play. But those systems (Salesforce, etc.) are **not capabilities**. Most manufacturers don't recognize the difference between these systems and their own organizational capabilities shortcomings, until there's an issue or a key piece of business is in jeopardy, or perhaps even already lost

If a customer is critically important to your business, you need to have multiple contacts and accessibility inside their organization. But make sure you don't get the cart before the horse. Before you undertake an effort to increase your accessibility, you must ensure that you have effectively set your priorities, so that you only invest your energy and resources with the right accounts. (For more on this subject please refer to our Targeting & Prioritization White Paper from earlier this year)

After identifying and prioritizing those customers that do warrant better accessibility, you need to establish and maintain multiple contacts and data points - no one person has all the answers or the needed insight to help you direct your energies and investments. Our rule of thumb is that you need at least four different perspectives inside an organization.

Further penetrating existing customer organizations is simply a form of networking, but with added value. Let's be clear about this - it is not luck, it is hard work. Of course some people are better at it than others - and some people enjoy it and others abhor it. An important part of being successful at this is reaching out to, and connecting with, people you've never met before. If there are common connections, great. However, the reality is that most of the time those connections aren't there or aren't strong enough to make a credible introduction.

The first step is to map out the key influences in the organization, to identify and understand these buying influences. The next step is to understand the relationship gaps you must try to bridge. This will always be a work in progress, as these organizations continue to ebb and flow - it is the nature of the business today. Armed with this information, you can develop a game plan to not only increase your accessibility, but also target where that increased accessibility will be most effective in increasing your business.

The Buying Influences

An essential element of effectively increasing your accessibility is understanding The Buying Influences. When we think about the buying influences, we believe there are at least five you should recognize and understand. They are the Gate Keeper, Technical Buyer, User Buying, Economic Buyer and Internal/External Coach. Each plays 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, but in many cases, they are there only to analyze and organize 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 brand fit, combined with the right sensory and qualitative characteristics, is evaluated. Of course, at this level their primary role is to screen the products that don't fit, so they will always look for the imperfections and flaws - that's their job
- **User** - the restaurant operators, franchisees (if they franchise) the cooks, 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, you'll know about it sooner rather than later, assuming you're connected to the right players
- **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 final decision makers, they have a lot at stake, especially if a new initiative fails. The failure is one thing, but the fact the organization has invested in something that hasn't worked out can result in fatigue and emotional letdown, which then has the potential to 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 or may not influence a given decision, but the real value a person filling this role provides is an understanding of the priorities, the players, and how things really get done. Many suppliers don't recognize, identify, or use such a resource. Those who do have an advantage
- **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. Keep in mind that just because they may not 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 these buying influences and take advantage of them when you can.

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 - a topic to ask about their business that demonstrates you know something about what they value.

Some ways to do that are:

- If it is a publicly traded company - listen in on the quarterly calls, sign up for the email alerts
- Utilize the network of other vendors around the business. The soft drink teams, real estate professionals, money-lenders, and the like, all have helpful perspectives.
- Using publicly available information, you can find out 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. Overall strategy and direction are not set in either purchasing or product development - those functions implement strategy. Marketing and the C suite set strategy - you need their perspective.

Avoiding the Bias Trap

When you begin to get truly connected to these organizations and understand how they really work and make decisions, you can begin to identify and avoid two common bias traps.

We frequently see and experience two types of bias patterns in sales process. These biases can be major impediments.

- **Availability Bias** - the tendency to overvalue the most available information, contacts, or solutions. For example, if the primary contact is only with purchasing, then the salesperson may overvalue that particular perspective only because it is the most available.
- **Confirmation Bias** - the habit of overvaluing information and insights which confirm a specific strategy, course of action, or overall approach which aligns with YOUR expectations. One common bias could be an individual perception of what is believed to be the customer brand or positioning. If you're not the target audience, then you need to learn about that audience and how the brand is built to resonate with THAT target

We often hear salespeople, managers, or senior executives 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 and insights reside.

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

Want to learn more about best practices? Give any of us a call - we're always happy to share our perspective and communicate what we've seen work well.

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.

"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

Mac Brand; mbrand@bellwetherfoodgroup.com; 773-255-6466

Rob Hardy; rhardy@bellwetherfoodgroup.com; 617-281-5175

Jon Jameson; jjameson@bellwetherfoodgroup.com; 843-422-4285