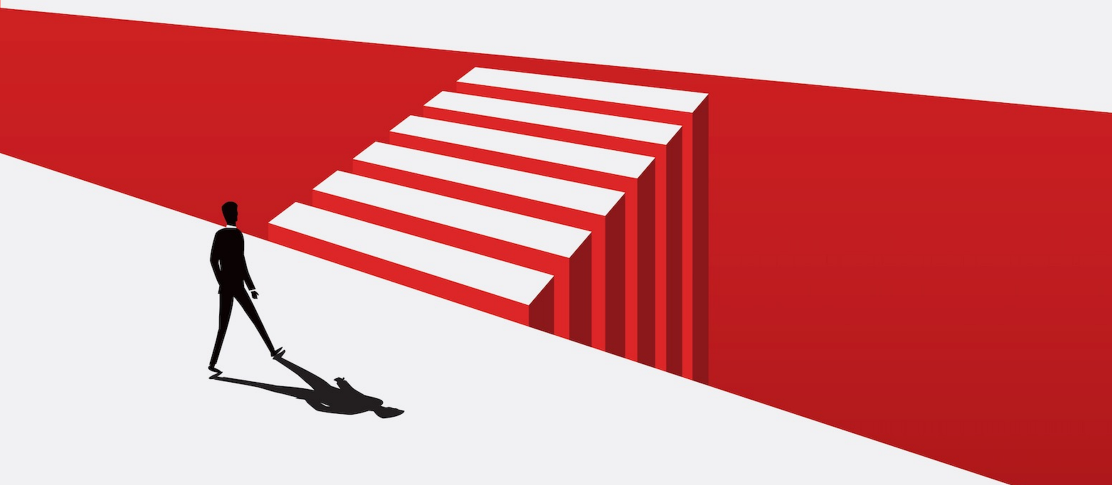
HISHAM AL GURG

the big deal



A 6-STEP FORMULA to Kill Your **Low Sales Stress** and Help You Close the Biggest Deals Ever

THE BIG DEAL

A 6-Step Formula to Kill Your Low Sales Stress and Help You to Close the Biggest Deals Ever

HISHAM ALGURG

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"Good products can be sold by honest advertising. If you don't think your product is good, you have no business to be advertising it."

–David Ogilvy

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Introduction

In today's world, many professionals are leaving their secure jobs to start their own businesses in search of a better life. One of the biggest challenges these entrepreneurs face in their new businesses is low sales. The reasons for this challenge vary from not having the right salespeople on board to the clients not responding positively to the pitch or simply not buying. With the internet giving your clients many options to find competitors from around the globe, this makes the challenge even greater.

So, how do you make sure that low sales are not a challenge you have to worry about in your business?

The book you hold in your hands will show you in 6 easy-to-follow practical steps how to never worry about low sales again, ever. I call them the **6 Ps System**. I have used the exact same **6 Ps System** to train all the sales teams in my 12 companies on how to sell big-ticket products to customers from all around the globe. I designed the **6 Ps System** 20 years ago, and my companies still use it today to sell high-ticket products and services to large multinational organizations, and it still works perfectly. We also use the system to sell low-ticket products in bulk orders, but a minimum bulk order of $100,000.

I am not a theory guy; I am a business owner with 20 years of experience owning and managing a diversified group of companies with more than 450 employees in 9 different countries. I am also a serial investor in many startups and growth companies. And in almost every company I invest in or manage, I immediately fix the low sales problem by implementing this simple 6-step system.

So, you will learn these practical steps from someone who didn't simply compile 6 steps from Google or YouTube. These steps are being practiced and used in all of my companies every day.

I have taught this sales system to many friends who own businesses with teams as small as two people. It has also worked for other entrepreneurs who have more than 3,000 employees. There is no reason why it should not work for you, whether you are selling $50 items or $10,000,000.

You want proof? Sure, you are most welcome to visit any of my companies at any of their locations across 9 different countries in cities from San Francisco to Sydney. Act as a customer, and my sales team will use the same 6 steps to close the deal with you.

I promise you that if you learn this system, practice it yourself, and later teach it to your sales team, you will have no issues with low sales again, and your company will show measurable growth in less than 3 months. The sooner you implement this system in your company, the sooner you will see results beyond your expectations.

Most people don't lack knowledge of what they need to do, they lack practical action. And this book is not about sharing just the knowledge, but it will push you to act, so you can see immediate results in the way you sell.

Now, the only action you need to take is to learn the system by reading the following chapters. If the system makes sense to you, try it in your next sales deal. You have nothing to lose.

I am confident that one day you will send me a message to thank me for changing your business forever. Yes, a simple book can significantly change your business and your life. This is one of those books.

How You Should Read this Book

This is not a reference book. This is a practical step-by-step process to help you greatly increase your chance of closing big deals to small and large organizations. The order of each step in the process is crucial. You shouldn't skip a step as it may seriously impact your expected results. I recommend you read the chapters of this book in the sequential order.

I have written certain exercises for you to do at the end of each chapter. Don't skip them. A practical book can't be useful if you don't do the steps that require action from you. Making big money requires work, so you will need to get off your chair and roll up your sleeves.

Each of the topics in this book qualifies to be a separate book on its own. There are many topics which I briefly touch on, but I cover these topics in depth in my entrepreneurship courses which I teach periodically when I have time; so if you want to learn more details about a specific topic, find these courses online and join them either thru webinars or in person if you are in Dubai or in a city where I am speaking. I don't do these courses often as my companies keep me busy all year long, but I usually do at least two a year.

To make this book beneficial for all types of products targeting all types of customers, I will assume that you are selling high-ticket products to large organizations, which are usually the hardest type of sales and take the longest time. If you are selling small-ticket items to smaller size companies or to individuals, the 6 Ps process will still work for you; however, you will find that your sales cycle will be much faster and involve less preparation.

I always train my sales team for the toughest sales, so they can quickly and efficiently handle the easy sales but are always ready to close the toughest deals with complete confidence. I want the same for you.

Now, do you want to sit here and wonder whether these 6 Ps will work for you or do you want to see for yourself? Why not get started to learn what they are all about and start implementing them? You have nothing to lose and only sales to gain, and you do want to sell more, don’t you?

I thought so, so let's get started. Enjoy the journey.

The 6 Ps System

Step 1: The Product

"Don't find customers for your products, find products for your customers"

–Seth Godin

Believing Lies

One of the big challenges that faces a starting entrepreneur, which I also see with many companies that ask me to help them sell their product in the Middle-East Region, is that we believe our own lies. We believe that our product does solve a big problem, and that big problem is a reality for our target customer.

The reason why we make ourselves believe these lies, is that we feel that we have invested so much time producing and creating and building our product, that it makes no sense that there are no customers out there who do not need it.

We imagine that the problem is big enough without verifying that misperception. In our mind, we try to sell ourselves on the idea that there are a lot of customers who are suffering from the problem our product solves, and we just need to find these customers.

After years of many failed businesses, I realized that I was believing my own lies. My team and I were so blinded by our own positivity and ambition, thinking that our product *did* solve a big problem without even verifying that lie.

I soon realized that if there were many customers who were suffering from these problems, then we should clearly see them and find them without a lot of effort. We don't have to go hunting for them. They would be out there sharing their big problem, searching, and asking for someone to help them.

So, if you are lying to yourself and to your employees telling them that you have created a product that solves a big problem without verifying this claim and assumption with real customers, then you are hurting yourself, your family, your employees, and you're soon heading towards disaster in your business. If this applies to you, you need to stop immediately.

And as hard as this message sounds, I hope that it wakes you up to realize that you're trying to do an impossible job—seeking to close big deals by trying to sell a product that very few people need, or a product that alleviates a very small pain.

If you have picked up this book trying to sell big deals faster, you better find big problems that customers are trying to solve. You cannot go out to the market and approach any customer, small or large, until you fix your product first and ensure that it's the *best* solution to the *biggest* problem that these customers face.

Solving the Unimportant

As a global serial investor, I am continuously getting pitched by smart entrepreneurs to invest in their company. The first thing I look at while studying their pitch deck is their product and what problem it solves.

Many customers are dying to find solutions for their big problems; unfortunately, they don't find the solutions and continue to suffer by losing money and opportunities every day. Not because they aren't seeking solutions, but because smart entrepreneurs who should be working on solving these big problems for them, choose to solve smaller problems that these customers are not even interested in.

When I ask these entrepreneurs, “Why aren’t you focused on solving these big problems?” The answer is always the same, “We didn’t know about them!”

In other words, they did not do their homework about the market they are serving. They didn’t even bother to speak to enough of their target customers before making their product.

So, I continuously wonder if there would ever be an online community where customers who want to resolve their big problems can publish these problems on the community pages. Creative entrepreneurs can then work on solving these problems and build solutions that customers want to buy. Only then would both parties win. The entrepreneur who will stop wasting his life producing products that no one wants to buy, and the customer will start enjoying the benefits of great products that are solving his big problems.

Tips About the Product

When it comes to the first P in the **6 Ps System**, the Product, I have 6 tips for you to follow:

Tip # 1. Don’t Solve Small Problems

My advice to you is to deeply assess the size of the problem which your product solves. If your product turns out to be solving a small problem, throw that product away. Scrap it. Whatever you do, do not try to sell it in the market. Why would you spend your life solving small problems making peanuts?

The time that you invest in your business by building, refining, creating, polishing, and improving a product that solves a small problem is a waste. You will never get that time back. In life, you can make more money, but you cannot make more time. So, stop solving small problems and wasting your time. Wouldn’t you rather spend the same amount of time solving a much bigger problem?

Every large business out there that is generating billions in revenue, is because it is solving a huge problem, or it is solving a big problem for a lot of people.

Self-made billionaire, Naveen Jain says, "If you want to make a billion dollars, solve a 10-billion-dollar problem."

Serial investor, Peter Diamandis says: "Do you want to be a billionaire? Just solve a billion-person problem."

So, either you solve a multibillion-dollar problem or solve a problem that is impacting a billion people, both messages clearly indicate that you need to focus on solving big problems.

How big do you think the problem which UBER, the peer-to-peer ride sharing company, solves is? How many people are impacted by the solution which UBER provides? Billions of people. That's why UBER is a multibillion-dollar company.

Find customers who are hurting

Your first job as an entrepreneur or a business owner, is not to just create an innovative product. Your job is to *first* find customers who are hurting from big problems; have a dialogue with them and study the problems and their impacts.

Assess your product first. Make sure it is in great demand. Go out there and sell it yourself. The first salesperson your company should have is you. You should be the one who meets your first customers face-to-face and listens to their problems and tries to solve them. Remember, if your product solves a small problem, you should not sell it. You should find a bigger problem first and modify your product to solve that big problem. And if your current product can't, then scrap it and build a new one that does. Back to the drawing board as they say.

The sooner you understand that you should focus on solving big problems and not small ones, the sooner you will be on your way to becoming a successful entrepreneur, and your low sales problem will be solved.

For now, your number one role is to go back and assess your product and identify whether it solves a big problem or not.

Action Steps:

Let us make sure that your product meets the criteria of solving a big problem that is hurting your customers.

Do an assessment by answering these questions:

1. Does my product solve a *big* problem for my target customer that is worth solving?

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2. Is my product the best solution out there among all of the other possible solutions? How sure am I?

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3. How did you come up with your product? Was it created as a result of many customers complaining about a big problem they have? Is your product a perfect fit to solve their big problem?

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4. Have you met hundreds of customers that are suffering from the problem your product solves? Did you talk to them personally?

If you have not talked to your customers yourself, you will need to get out there and do it. Conduct hundreds of discovery meetings, so you understand the needs of your target customers. I will explain how to do these meetings in greater details in chapter 2.

Did your product pass the above questions?

For the sake of completing this book, I will assume that your product actually does solve a big problem for your target customers, and you have identified a big gap in the market which your product can fix, and you now just have to make sure that you can sell the product to them.

If that's the case, then you have passed the first test of your product: the problem size. Let's move on to the product quality.

Tip # 2. Think Quality

One huge mistake that entrepreneurs and companies make is to go out there on the market with a mediocre product. Their product may solve a big problem, but the actual product is average, mediocre, or is of poor quality. So, I ask these entrepreneurs: "Why are you selling a product that is of poor quality?"

The reply is: "I am *still* working on improving the product, I am fine-tuning it, perfecting it, and getting it in better shape."

Then I ask: "So, why don't you wait until you perfect your product before meeting your customers and stop pitching a mediocre product?"

The answer I hear is: “If I don't go to market with my mediocre product, I am going to miss many opportunities and those missed sales will go to a competitor.”

In a way, I do agree that you should test your market by having a viable prototype, so you can get feedback directly from customers on how to improve it. This feedback will help you build a product not solely based on your ideas, but it will be a reflection of the feedback that you are receiving from your customers. However, I do not agree with going out pitching a mediocre product to customers and asking them to buy it, while the product is not perfect and ready for the market. You can use a minimally viable product for testing and for research, but don’t try to close a big deal with a product that is not ready for the market.

It is the same as you going to buy a brand-new car, and the car manufacturer tells you: We are still not 100% ready with perfecting how the brakes function on your car. They sometimes work and sometimes don’t. The seatbelts also sometimes work well and sometimes don’t. Are you still going to be interested in buying that car when you hear such statements from the car manufacturer?

It is common sense that there are certain aspects in your product that must work perfectly all the time. Your customer does not care about your excuses about why your product is not functioning as it should. If you have the guts to go out in the market and pitch a product to a customer trying to convince them to buy it when it's not ready, then you must be out of your mind. If you will not buy an incomplete, low-quality, mediocre product, why would you expect your customers to buy yours?

My advice to you is, if there are elements of your product that need to be perfected, then hold on to your sales activities. Refine and improve the quality of your product; make sure it’s tested by customers who are willing to test it for you at no cost. Only when the test customer tells you that the product is acceptable, and does not need any more modifications, and he's willing to buy it at a price that you have asked, you can then start selling it to the market.

A superior facial recognition technology company from Hungary convinced us that their product was ready for the market. So, we strategically partnered with them to help them grow their sales in the UAE market. I asked my technical team to evaluate their product before setting up pitch meetings for them with potential clients. My director of IT was very disappointed to learn that the Hungarian company didn't have a ready product to sell; instead, they only had a prototype.

Before signing our strategic partnership agreement, I pulled the CEO aside and asked him: "I want to ask you something, and I want you to be 100% clear about your answer, is your product 100% ready to be sold and delivered if you get an order today? The reason I ask is that we have tested your product, and my technical team was surprised to learn that you only have a prototype; your product is far from being ready. In other words, your product is still raw, not cooked well, and far from being high-quality. Last week, you told me that it was ready and now my team tells me the opposite. My question today is straightforward: is your product ready-for-market or not?"

The CEO looked me directly in the eye and said: "Mr. Hisham, do you think that I would come to Dubai, spend all of this money in setting up our operations here, hire a local team, and come to sign this strategic agreement with your reputable office, if we did not have a ready-for-market product? Of course, our product is ready. Your technical team evaluated an older version of the product, which we were still fine-tuning it, but now our facial recognition engine is 1000% ready-for-market. Don't worry."

I replied: “Okay, I will take your word for it. The last thing I want is to open doors for your sales team to decision-makers to sell a product that is far from perfect. This will be bad for our reputation and yours. For that reason, I wanted to double-check with you directly.”

He replied: “Don’t worry, we will not embarrass you. We know what quality is, and we know what a ready-for-market product means. We will make you proud, and our future clients are going to love our technology, guaranteed.”

I must admit that his words comforted me at that time, so I went ahead and signed the strategic agreement in good faith.

I later learned that I made a mistake by accepting words in the air. Ready-for-market and high-quality means different things to different people, especially in the technical world.

The company ended up selling only three of its products to large companies in Dubai after 12 meetings with clients and decision-makers. All of these three deals went soar. The clients cancelled the purchase order a few weeks later because the product did not pass the quality test, and it kept failing the user acceptance testing (UAT).

It turned out that the definition of ready-for-market to the Hungarian company did not match the definition of the client. To the company, the product was ready-to-be-sold as-is; any required fine-tuning can be done afterwards during the deployment phase. So the Hungarian company was happy to sell a low-quality, not-ready product and then fix it as they go.

To the client, the product definition of “ready” means that the product has to be of the highest quality from day one. It was not acceptable to them to customize a product which kept failing UATs. Despite the repeated written promises from the company that they will fix all the “minor issues,” clients did not want to take the risk of accepting a half-ready product and cancelled their orders.

The lesson my team and I learned: before partnering with any company, we must make sure that the product not only works perfectly, we have to professionally test it in a testing lab with an experienced testing team. Also, never try to sell anything to clients if you are not 1000% confident that your product works flawlessly. Your reputation is on the line. You may be able to fix products quickly, but you can’t fix a damaged reputation that easy. Never take that risk. It's not worth it.

Action Steps:

Is your product ready to be sold?

1. How many customers have purchased your product already?

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2. How many customers have paid full price for the product?

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3. How many customers have no complaints about your product for at least one year from the time that they purchased it from you?

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4. How many customers were happy to give you testimonies about your product?

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If the answer to the previous question is zero or less than five, then you are probably not ready to go out there and sell your product to large organizations.

Until you reach at least five customers who are willing to give you testimonies raving about the quality of your product and how it effectively solves their problems, please do not think about approaching large organizations to buy your product. Save yourself the embarrassment, the time, and save your money because most likely they will not buy from you.

Tip # 3. Make Your Price Affordable

A common mistake I see entrepreneurs repeat, when trying to sell their product to large organizations, is the belief that just because these large companies have a lot of money, the price of the product must also go up, way up.

I have attended many meetings with entrepreneurs and their sales teams, which we either have partnered with or invested in, where I saw them quote very high prices; totally underestimating the intelligence, resources, and the research that these large organizations conduct to find out the real price of their product. They can easily find out how much your previous customers have paid you, and what your competitions' products are selling for. As a result of their underestimation of this, companies end up losing the deal because of exaggerated pricing mistakes.

My advice to you is to think very carefully before inflating your price just because the buyer is a larger or well-funded organization.

Benefits of Catching a Big Fish:

When you sell your product to a large organization, there are several advantages over selling the same product to a small organization:

1. They buy your product in large quantities.
2. The contract period is usually longer.
3. They become a very good reference for you to sell to other large organizations.
4. They do a lot more testing, putting your product under the microscope, which can result in improving the product's quality or the delivery of your product in the future.
5. They raise the credibility of your company, increasing its valuation, its income, and profitability; making it attractive for investors to give you cash when needed.

On the other hand, there are some disadvantages when selling to large organizations, which not many entrepreneurs pay attention to, as they get overexcited about having a large organization as a customer:

1. Their decision process is much longer, and the sales cycle is longer, which could exhaust many of your company resources before you get a final answer.
2. There could be more than one decision-maker who evaluates, negotiates, and approves the purchase, which makes the sales process more complicated compared to selling to smaller companies.

3. You may have to settle with lower margins considering that large organizations will buy in large quantities. So, your objective will be to make more money but less profit.

4. Their testing process is longer.

5. Their payment terms are not usually flexible.

6. They are usually late in paying you on the due date, which sometimes could take up to 12 months of receiving no money, putting your company at a low cash flow risk.

My Advice to You:

Before you sign a deal with a large organization, you ask them to give you a commitment letter issued by their finance department that in case their payments get delayed, you will have the right to either cancel the delivery of the product, postpone it, or seize rendering services to them with no penalties on your side.

Most large organizations understand the cash flow risk smaller companies face when selling to large companies. They would be happy to give you that letter if you clearly explain to them the negative impact their lack of payment could have on your ability to purchase raw materials, pay salaries, pay subcontractors, and other 3rd parties who may be involved in the project.

Don't let them intimidate you:

I have seen large organizations change their payment terms and strict policies based on smaller companies' insistence to pay them a much larger advance payment or pay as per the committed dates. Just because a company is large, that does not make it unrealistic in its expectations of its suppliers. At the end of the day, you are dealing with people, and people are sensible and logical. Your job is to explain your position of asking for a payment-on-time term to bring them to their senses.

Once you are issued that letter, go to your investor, or whoever is backing you up financially, and get their commitment that in case these large organizations still violate their commitment of paying you on time, your investor will bridge the gap of any cash shortfall. Do not wait until this problem happens; get the assurance of both sides, the customers, and your investors. That way, no matter what happens, you will have enough fuel in your tank to ensure that you reach your ultimate destination of having enough cash to complete the project.

Action Steps:

1. How are you currently pricing your product to small and large organizations? Do you have a clear pricing strategy which makes financial sense?

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2. How competitive is your pricing compared to other options which customer may consider to purchase?

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3. Are your payment terms comfortable to ensure that you will not run out of cash when selling to large organizations? What if your customers squeeze your payment terms further? What is your limit in payment days which you will not cross not matter what?

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4. Do you have an investor or a bridge finance company to back you up in large deals? Are they offering you attractive financing rates?

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Tip # 4. Have Flexible Payment Terms

I have worked with many organizations which have a high-quality product, great previous track record, and a solid delivery of the promised value. Still, unfortunately, their product falls short when it comes to the product flexibility.

There is nothing worse than spending a lot of time pitching a product to a large organization, meeting their decision-makers, agreeing to do a pilot, and spending months going back and forth, only to find out that after all of this effort the customer insists on certain features or options that must exist in your product in order to solve *their* big problems, but your product fails to meet these requirements, and you end up losing the deal due to your product's inflexibility.

Therefore, it is very important *not* to lock your product features based on what you or your product design team thinks. Do not mistakenly assume that no further enhancement or modification is required for your product. You must build your product in a way that it is easily flexible, amendable, and can be custom-made to your customers' requirements.

However, I do agree that you should *not* keep changing your product to meet each requirement of your customer, but have a product that is easily adapted and can be modified and improved for all your customers when needed.

Control Their Excitement:

Large organizations sometimes get overwhelmed and excited about adding new requirements and features to a supplier's product. Only to find that the modifications aren't being used.

So, it is paramount that before you sign the agreement with your customer, you must list and finalize all the features and options that will be included in your product. Conversely, you should exclude any feature that you anticipate will not be as useful or necessary. You must educate your customer on this list as they may not be familiar with the benefits of each option or feature.

You must ensure that if the customer wishes to add any additional features, there will be extra costs. And I advise you to carefully consider how you come up with the extra cost, so that it does not jeopardize the deal. You also don't want it to lose your profit margin because you may have underestimated the cost of the additional feature to your bottom line.

The best thing to do is set a variable price to any added features. So that the more time, effort, resources, and money it will cost you to build that new feature, the more the customer will pay you, eliminating any risk to your bottom line.

Action Steps:

1. How flexible is your product when it comes to custom-building it to your customer's requirements?

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2. Do you have a flexible pricing methodology to allow for new features to be added at little or no risk to you?

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Tip # 5. Deliver Remarkably

When you deal with large organizations, it is not enough to simply have a high-quality product; you must ensure that the delivery and implementation of the product is professionally done.

There are two elements that impact the delivery of a product to your customer, the team and the process.

The Team:

You must have a professional team to deliver all the promises that you have made to your customer in your mutually agreed contract. This team must follow a very professional delivery process using productivity and collaboration tools to ensure that there is no room for mistakes, delays, inefficiencies, or lack of communication between the team and the customer.

Throughout my business career, I have witnessed many organizations that spend millions of dollars bidding in large tenders, and successfully winning them, only to destroy all their efforts by badly delivering their product.

I will dedicate a whole chapter to talking in great detail about hiring the right team to support you in delivering remarkably to your customer. For now, my suggestion is to have a separate team dedicated to the remarkable delivery of your product.

The team must be 100% focused on one thing and one thing only; ensuring that you deliver 100% of everything that you have promised. Then you must over deliver 30% more. The extra 30% is where you will get the wow-factor reaction from your customer, which will ensure that you will get referrals. And this is how your business will grow, by getting referrals from wowed customers.

This team must be top-notch in every aspect of their delivery. You cannot afford to make mistakes with large organizations. If you don't have a professional team to deliver your product on a much higher scale than you are used to, then do not approach large companies. Build your delivery team first.

The Product Delivery Process:

The second most important aspect when it comes to delivering the product, is having a detailed process, which the delivery team will follow to ensure a remarkable on-time error-free delivery.

Many entrepreneurs succeed in hiring a good team to deliver their product, but they fail to ensure that this team agrees on an effective process of delivery. An effective delivery process must clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the team, their dedicated tasks, and timelines for each of those tasks in the process.

My advice to you is to draft and design a process that is robust and well mapped out on a very good collaboration tool, which the whole team—including the customer—can access to keep track of each task and milestone.

This collaboration tool or software should have enough alarms and warnings before a delay or mistake occurs, where all the main stakeholders are informed of any potential delay or mistake before it happens.

There are many tools that you can download and test free of charge. So, you can find and use the best software or tool that your team and your customer will be comfortable with. I strongly recommend that you consider using the collaboration tools if you want to ensure that your product is of the highest quality, error-free, and professionally delivered.

Action Steps:

1. How many people in your organization have you allocated to provide remarkable product delivery?

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2. What collaboration & productivity tools are they using to ensure on-time, error-free delivery?

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Tip # 6. Let Them Try Before They Buy

Your product must be built in a way that allows you to do a pilot or a POC.

POC is short for *proof of concept*, and a pilot is a test on a smaller scale offered to the customer before the customer agrees to commit to buy.

Many big deals have been lost as a result of entrepreneurs refusing to do a free-of-charge pilot or POC. If you're going to sell to large companies and close big deals, you need to have an option for the customer to test and try everything that you are promising about your product *before* they commit to buy.

Having a pilot option gives comfort to your customer that you are willing to back up all the claims that you promised during the pitch stage. Many entrepreneurs rush to close a deal immediately without thinking about how to give comfort and assurance to the decision-maker and reduce the risk before they decide to purchase your product.

Companies that offer a pilot or POC have a much greater advantage over those who don't. It is estimated that having POCs or pilots increases your chances of closing a deal with the customer by a minimum of 67% and often greater.

Entrepreneurs ask me whether they should charge for the POC or offer it for free. My advice is to always try to offer it free-of-charge. If your objective is to reduce the risk for your customer, then there is nothing better than a zero-risk decision which the decision-maker can easily make. If you, however, decide to charge for your POC, you are sending a negative message to the decision-maker which shouts clearly that you don't want to invest in backing up your claims. So, the customer may think: If you, as the supplier of this product, are not willing to back up your own product by offering a free POC, why should they take a risk by paying for it.

When you make a POC, make sure that everything will go right. Even a small mistake during the POC can cost you the loss of the deal. My advice to you is to pay a big attention to this very important step in the sales process and do not underestimate the things that could go wrong. Use a collaboration tool for the POC team to ensure it will be error-free.

Any mistake or shortage your customer finds in your POC, will immediately translate to a negative message saying that you are not a professional, your product is not robust, you can’t fulfill everything you have promised, and that there is a big chance that you may fail in the actual delivery of the full-fledged product. So, don’t allow a mistake to happen. Double check everything.

POC Duration:

The duration of the POC solely depends on the product or service that you are selling. I have seen POCs that take less than a day to complete, especially if it's software or a digital product, where a simple download with some sample preloaded data was sufficient enough for the customer to be satisfied that the software actually delivers on its promises.

I have also seen pilots that take a minimum of six months and a full team of professionals who are based at the customer's premises working around the clock to demonstrate that their product works on a small scale. Such pilots cost the supplier hundreds of thousands of dollars, but they happily offered it to the customer at no cost due to the size of the project.

It is solely up to you and your customer’s negotiations to decide on how long your pilot will take, and how much investment is required from your side to demonstrate the promises that you have committed to.

What to Demonstrate:

Make sure that you previously agree with your customer on what exactly the pilot will demonstrate, the features it will showcase, and which feature will be excluded from the pilot and will only be included in your final product.

This is a common practice that you see in companies that sell you free software online where they deactivate the best features in their software which they know that the customer will need. Once the full version of the software is purchased, then those key features are activated. At the same time, you must still ensure that the demo or the free software shows a very workable deliverable that demonstrates great results and benefits to the customer using the software. If you limit and minimize the benefits too much, the pilot may fail in demonstrating its strength and its superiority over other competitive products. So, you need to be extra attentive to your decision of which features to include or exclude from the pilot.

I will cover in great detail what most of you need to know and do during a POC or a pilot in chapter four.

Action Steps:

1. Are you offering your customers a free POC or a pilot? If not, find out how you can start offering it with the least cost and risk to you.

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2. Do you have a dedicated team to conduct your pilot? Are they using a collaboration tool that ensures error-free and on-time pilot delivery?

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3. Do you have a document to share with your customer on what features will be demonstrated during the pilot and what will be excluded?

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Doing Your Homework: The Preparation Before the Pitch

You now have a solid high-quality product which solves a big problem. It is priced right, and you have the right team and process to professionally delivery it. And you are prepared to offer a POC. Before you approach these large organizations to pitch your product, you better do your homework. This is what we will cover in the next chapter in more detail.

If your product did not pass all of the product assessment questions, don't worry. You can use the next chapter to help you do your homework so you can design a great product. I will cover the importance of gathering facts and data from your customers about the problems they seek to solve, and the solutions they are dying to find.

You should never pitch your product to a decision-maker without doing your homework. Leave that for the immature salespeople, you are a professional, and professionals always do their homework by diagnosing the problem before jumping to offer their clients solutions.

Before moving to the next chapter, I have to ask you: Have you answered all the questions in this chapter? If not, *STOP reading now!* Do not go to the next chapter! Go back and answer *all* of the questions. This book can't help you if you skip through it.

By answering all those questions honestly, the process will be perfectly tailored to your company to increase the chance of success. The books you read give you knowledge, but knowledge on its own is not enough. I want the **6 Ps System** to have a significant impact on your business. So, answer the questions, and apply the learnings and the system in your company. I promise you that you will see a serious impact on your sales results.

Step 2: The Preparation

"There are no facts inside the building, only opinions. So get the hell out."

–Steve Blank

Doing Your Homework with Discovery Meetings

Why bother with discovery meetings:

Preparing for your pitch before meeting the decision-maker requires you to conduct your homework and market research. This step is by far the most ignored among all the six steps which you must follow to succeed in closing big deals to large customers.

The reason why most people either put off, or completely ignore this step, is because they feel they know their product well, they fully understand the customer's needs, and have pitched their product to similar customers before. So why waste time doing any homework? This assumption is a big mistake.

One reason why most people ignore this step is that they are too excited about finding the target customer and approaching them as soon as possible to pitch their product. They feel that if there is anything to learn about the customer or his needs, the best thing to do is directly meet the decision-maker and find out if the decision-maker is interested in their product or not.

What they fail to recognize is that most decision-makers are too busy to reveal any of their needs to every salesperson who knocks on their door. Moreover, some decision-makers are not aware that they do have a need or a problem that needs to be solved. By ignoring doing the homework, the salesperson risks going into a meeting blindly, costing his company missed opportunities that could be worth millions, and significantly reducing their chance of closing the deal.

An Australian company approached my company in 2014 asking for our strategic support to open doors for them to decision-makers in the UAE and Saudi Arabia market. As soon as my team assessed the product and its price, we realized that the product was fantastic and very well built; however, the price was too high. Most likely, the company will not be able to sell many units to its target, car dealerships. We recommend that they revise the price and find alternative payment terms to make it more affordable. They refused. They insisted that the product's high quality justifies the high cost. The dialogue with the company's co-founder went something like this:

Co-founder: "Mr. Hassan, we have been selling this product in Australia for three years now. Not a single car dealership complained about the price. Why should I adjust my price for the UAE market, which is more lucrative than the Australian market and the UAE dealers can easily afford it."

My Head of Research, Hassan: "Sir, I understand your point. But let me advise you not to fall for the same mistake we see many foreign companies make when they enter the MENA region. Just because the market is cash-rich and very lucrative does not mean that people will buy products at a high price blindly. Your price is way too high. This may put off many dealerships from buying your product because the risk is high, and you don't have local market references. They don't even know if it will deliver what it promises. So, why don't you test the market with a lower price with a couple of dealerships, and if it works, you can increase it to the other dealerships? Alternatively, you can do some discovery meetings with

5 to 10 dealerships, show them the product, and ask them what they think the product is worth? Don't tell them the price and don't sell the product. Tell them you are doing your market research, and the product is not for sale at this stage. Ask for their feedback only; do not try to sell."

Co-Founder: "Well, frankly speaking, I don't like your suggestion of lowering the price for a couple of dealerships; but I am happy to do some discovery meetings with a few dealerships to get some feedback on the price. Can you set up meetings for me with some decision-makers at these dealerships?"

My Head of Research, Hassan: "Sure we can. Let's prepare some open questions to ask, and we can start the meetings next week."

We ended up meeting 12 dealerships. To the co-founder's surprise, car dealerships were not willing to pay even half the selling price he had in mind, because the product was new, untested, and the company had no reference in the local market. None of them wanted to be the Guinea pig. The co-founder and my team adjusted the price based on the recommendation of CEOs of three dealerships, who suggested that the ideal price should be per showroom, per month instead of a lump sum amount for the whole dealership. The CEOs were willing to try the product in one or two of their showrooms, and if it proved successful, they would roll it out to their other showrooms. This is a much safer approach.

Luckily, the co-founder was a wise man who changed the pricing as per the three CEOs suggestions, and in less than two months, his product has been used in 23 showrooms in the UAE. By the end of the year, his product was in 53 showrooms in the UAE. He was selling it at the same price which he sold in Australia, but on subscription bases per showroom instead of a lump sum. And his clients loved the product.

If he was stubborn and insisted on not conducting the discovery meetings, and attempted to sell the product at a price higher than what the market accepted, he would have sold zero products in 12 months. Then he would have blamed the failure to sell on the economy, or the customers, who do not appreciate the product, or some other reason.

Conducting discovery meetings is critical. Don't skip it. Make sure it's done before you do any sales pitches in any foreign market. And don't outsource it. Do it yourself. You will learn so much from just talking to customers yourself.

Five Reasons for Conducting Your Research

Reason # 1. It helps validate all your assumptions.

In my opinion, assumptions are the most dangerous disease that could kill a business. As entrepreneurs, we tend to underestimate the number of assumptions we make in every aspect of our business. These aspects include the needs of the customer, the type of customer we target, the market we should operate in, the price we shall sell the product for, the features that are required to be in the product, and the list of assumptions goes on and on.

The number one reason why many companies go bankrupt is that they run out of cash due to their poor sales. The reason they don't sell enough is that they are misguided by all the assumptions that they make in the business. These assumptions include approaching the wrong customer at the wrong time, pitching the wrong product, trying to solve the wrong problem, showing features that the customer does not need, giving a price that is not suitable or affordable for the customer, hiring people to do the pitch that are not suitable for the job, and so on.

Most mistakes that are made in business are usually the result of assumptions, so it is imperative for you to recognize that the more assumptions you have, the more mistakes you will make. The best way to eliminate making errors is by validating all your assumptions before you approach a customer. The most important aspect of doing your homework is to identify clearly what are the assumptions you are making in your sales pitch. And before going out there in the market and start fishing for new customers, you must first verify the assumption of the most essential elements of your pitch, such as:

- Is this customer the right customer for me?
- Does this customer have a problem that I can solve?
- Can this customer afford to buy my product?

- What other options does this customer have competing with my solution?
- Is addressing the problem of high priority to the customer?
- Does the customer clearly understand the problem?
- Does the customer know exactly how to select the best solution for the challenge?

In the coming pages, I will explain in great detail how to go about validating these assumptions, but for now, let's focus on the remaining reasons why doing your homework is paramount to your success in selling big deals to large customers.

Reason # 2. It provides you with inside information.

One of the most significant advantages of doing your homework is that you get to meet with one or more influencers who can openly share inside information with you about the decision-makers in the company and the problems that these decision-makers are facing. You can learn the other options that they have in solving these problems, how soon they are looking to solve the problem, and a lot more relevant information that isn't available online or in the public domain.

The more time you spend in meeting people inside these large companies, the more you will know about their internal issues, how do they go about making decisions, what the politics are like, how eager they are to innovate, and whether your product solves a major or a minor problem for them.

The best way to get more inside information is to prepare all your questions in advance, so that when you meet the influencer, you will ask the right questions and avoid questions that give you no clear data that could help you develop a better pitch to the decision-maker.

You need to invest much time before meeting with an influencer to list down very carefully and selectively a few key questions. Five to seven questions are ideal. You don't want to turn the meeting into an interrogation. If the influencer starts to feel uncomfortable, you will get shallow answers, which is not what you are looking for.

The advantage of drafting your questions ahead of time is that during the meeting you can focus more on how to ask the question. It's like an actor on stage or in a movie who memorizes the script of the dialogue, then all he had to do during the filming is focus on the performance and the strength of his emotions. He doesn't have to worry about remembering what to say.

Reason # 3. It helps you refine your solution.

The more information you receive before meeting the decision-maker about the problem and the challenges the company is seeking to solve, the better understanding you will have of the requirements of the customer. Therefore, you will be able to determine whether your product is a perfect fit.

If you feel that after having the meeting with the influencer that you are missing many of the features and benefits, you don't need to eliminate this organization from your target list immediately. Ask to meet another influencer to validate that the features and benefits which the first influencer is insisting on having. You may then determine if these features are a must-have or a nice-to-have.

The other important aspect of refining your solution is the customer may have lots of wishes and dreams about how he wants to solve his problem. There could be more than one decision-maker or influencer with desires, dreams, and hopes about how to solve the problem; but that does not mean that you should fulfill every feature the decision-makers wish to find in your solution.

So, you should carefully decide and educate the customer on the most important benefits that will solve the problem. If the decision-maker insists on having additional features, you could suggest they can be implemented in a second or a third phase of the solution plan. It is your job to educate the decision-makers and the influencers on which features can be provided at a later stage. You will be surprised at how many customers need guidance on how to buy a solution. Don't be intimidated by the large size of these companies; you should educate the decision-makers on what are fundamental, advanced, and not-needed features. Once the decision-maker sees you as an advisor, he will stop treating you like a supplier. So, act as an advisor and educate your customers on what is best for them and be very sincere about it.

Reason # 4. It will help you prepare for the decision-maker pitch.

The more information and insights you gather about the decision-maker's needs, concerns, unanticipated issues, personality type, and his decision-making style, the higher chances you will have in convincing him to accept your proposal.

So, it goes without saying that during your fact-finding meetings with influencers, your questions to these influencers should be focused on finding out the criteria which the decision-maker will follow in making a decision. The decision-maker will consider many elements when trying to solve their problem like, prioritizing finding a solution for the problem, assembling a team to investigate the issue, finding options to solve the problem, allocating budget for the problem or purchasing the solution, and expediting the purchase process.

We will go into more detail about what questions to ask and how to ask them during the decision-maker pitch and how to handle any objections that may arise during the pitch at a later stage.

Reason # 5. It will help you build an alliance of influences. It is imperative during the homework stage, or what we call the *discovery stage*, to meet as many different information providers and influencers from the organization to have a different perspective on the way their decision-makers prioritize their problems. Try to find out how they discuss internal problems and solutions, and their attitude toward innovative solutions.

Every meeting with an influencer or information provider should be a meeting where you increase how much they like and trust you, and constantly building a better rapport. It would help if you also gave small doses of information sharing, enlightenment, and educating the person about the grave importance and urgency of solving the problem at hand; and how you have solved similar problems for similar companies in the past.

It would be best if you let the influencer know that you are now at the information-gathering stage, and you will be presenting a possible solution to the decision-maker. However, since you have many assumptions, your objective of meeting with the influencer is to verify those assumptions before reaching the decision-maker.

Throughout these meetings, you need to win the support of the person giving you the information, since both of you have a common goal, which is to study the problem at hand and then offering a solution to the decision-maker.

So, it is imperative to ask the influencer about all the elements that would be extremely important for him to decide whether this is the best solution for the problem. The more the influencer shares with you about the critical elements in the solution, the better chance you will have in influencing the decision-maker about these elements.

For example, if you have met with the chief financial officer during the discovery stage, and he has stated that the organization is currently suffering from low cash flow. Then naturally, during your meeting with the decision-maker, you must highlight that your company is very flexible when it comes to the payment terms; and that you can work out a comfortable payment plan with the finance department, so it does not hurt the cash flow. Now, can you see how gathering insights from influencers can be of great value to you? Imagine if the decision-maker asks you what the payment terms are, and you say, 75% advance and 25% after delivery. You would probably have lost the deal.

Repeat the same method of gathering critical insights from other departments that could significantly improve your chance of making a better pitch to the decision-maker.

Action Steps:
In addition to the above five reasons, what other reasons can you think of that could be the motivating factor for you and your team to conduct in-depth discovery meetings for weeks before approaching decision-makers?

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It is never enough to say, "I have done all the homework that I need to do," because there is always someone else that you can meet and ask more questions to get more data and information; however, that does not mean that you continue to stay in the cycle of discovery meetings forever.

I recommend that you have a team that is always attending industry events and continuously learning what is happening in the market. A team that talks to different people from different companies, asks them questions, listens to their thoughts, finds insights, and then comes back and shares all of these insights about the market with your company's concerned departments. This will help you and your team to stay well-informed and educated about the challenges and opportunities in the market.

Who to Contact

Your objective during the discovery meeting is to contact people who have the information that you're seeking. These people must be able to comfortably and openly answer all the questions that you have to validate all your assumptions.

The easiest way to go about selecting the right people is first to list all the questions that you have, then ask yourself which department is likely to possess the answers to your questions. Think about which person in these departments is expected to have your answers.

Once you identify the target person, use your network to find someone who knows that person, and get an introduction. It is always better to have more than one person to verify the accuracy and integrity of the information and data you are receiving. The more people you meet, the merrier.

The last thing you want is to pitch a proposal to the decision-maker which is solely based on inaccurate data or invalidated information that is gathered from one person in the organization. There are several types of people in the organization who can and are willing to share information with you. Your best bet is to gather information from influencers of the decision-maker. It is your job to identify who are the influencers of the decision-makers. Collect much information about them so that you can immediately build rapport with them to make your information extraction process a breeze.

The best way to meet many people in an organization is to have each one of them introduce you to the other. For example, you might ask the head of finance who else he/she believes that you should meet to gather more information or to verify certain assumptions that you may have. Ask them if they can make an introduction to that person and inform them before they make the introduction of what exactly to say to the person as they introduce you.

Here's a script that you could use: “John, you have mentioned that the head of procurement would be the best person to talk to about the preferred payment options that the organization wishes to have while dealing with suppliers and vendors. Do you mind if you introduce me to him, so I can carefully study the preferred payment method and options? Also, before calling him, can you make sure that you let him know that my objective of meeting him is not to pitch him any product? Rather, it is to find out a little bit more about what he prefers in dealing with the payment method with suppliers so that later on, when I meet the decision-maker, we don't pitch something that he does not wish to accept? Thank you, John, I appreciate it.”

Action Steps:

1. For your product, who are the people you must meet who can give you answers to your discovery meetings questions? What is their role in the company? Make a list of as many people as you can think of.

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2. What information can you easily find out about the above people from your own contacts network?

In the next section, I will share with you how to get introduced to the target people you need to meet. So, read on.

The Discovery Process

How to get the appointment

Get introduced. It is challenging for any person to reject to meet with you if you were introduced to them by someone that is dear and near to their heart. The best introductions are made between people that like, respect, and do favors for each other. Moreover, usually, these people are close friends, colleagues, or people and organizations where they need to do favors for each other. It is your job to identify who is the best person who can introduce you to the target influencer. Never approach a potential influencer directly through email, telephone, or knocking on their door unless you explore all of the other options of getting introduced to them by someone that they like, respect, or want to do favors for.

One of my companies, SEED Group LLC, is dedicated to the introduction process and sets up meetings for companies that want to enter the Middle East market. Just like any other Asian market, the Middle East is a market where people do business with people that they know and trust; and middle-eastern people are very sociable and very well-connected. It could take you months to get an appointment with an important influencer if you don't know the right people who can help you get that appointment. If you don't have an influential introducer or a partner such as Seed Group in the Middle East, your second-best bet is to check your LinkedIn network and find people who are connected to the target person you want to meet and ask them for an introduction.

How to ask for an introduction

Write a meeting request script and test its effectiveness in getting you the meeting. Keep improving your script until it proves effective. Here is an example of a good script:

You: “Mary, I wonder if you can help me with something; I’m doing research in the market about the challenges of not having verified data in a specific sector, and how this lack of data may impact the decision-making process in the private and public sector. One of the important people who can help me with my research is a person by the name of John Smith, who works at ABC Corporation. I have noticed that you are connected to John through LinkedIn. I don't want to approach him without a proper introduction. Do you mind if you introduce me to him?”

Mary: “Sure, I can do that for you. What do you want me to tell him about you?”

You: “Well, exactly what I have just told you would be sufficient. Just say the following: Hi John, it’s been a while since we last spoke. I hope you are doing well. Mark is a good friend of mine; he is a professional and a dedicated expert in his field of data mining. Mark is currently researching data accuracy and its importance to the decision-making process in the Middle East. He has stated that you are one of the important and knowledgeable people in this domain who can add much value to the research that he is conducting, would you do me a favor John and meet with my friend Mark just for 30 minutes to share your opinion and your views on the topic? I would appreciate that. Mark is very flexible, and he can accommodate your best time to meet with him, he needs 30 minutes of your time, and he could drive to you, so you don't have to spend time traveling to meet him somewhere. Would you prefer that I ask him to contact you at the office or on your mobile?”

The best time to get your introducer, Mary, to make that phone call to the influencer or decision-maker is on the spot, because the chance of the introducer forgetting and getting busy with their own life is very high. Merely ask the introducer to make the phone call right now if the time is appropriate.

Do you need to use a script?

I firmly believe in having a script for every important meeting or discussion in your business. Unfortunately, many salespeople after closing a few sales deals, let go of the script just because they think they now know what to say and don’t need to use one. I disagree with this and believe that no matter how good you are in closing, you must stick to the script that helped you close all of the previous deals. Just because you have learned how to close with a script, that does not mean you will continue to close without one.

Imagine a superstar celebrity actor comes to a movie production studio and tells the director the following: “I have been acting for 30 years, I'm an expert in acting, you don't need to give me the screenplay. I know what to say, how to say it, when to say it, and the emotions that need to be attached to what I have to say.”

Do you believe that the actor’s performance will be top-notch if this is his attitude? Can you imagine the director accepting such an illogical proposal from the actor?

Even celebrities who have decades of experience, still memorize movie scripts to make sure that their focus during the act is not on which words to speak or which questions to ask in the dialogue of the movie. They know that they are there to perform at their best, and not to think about what to say during the act. Therefore, they use a script regardless of how many years of experience they have.

The same thing applies to people in business who want to influence and persuade others. It would be best if you mastered and fully memorized every word of every sentence and every question before going into an influencer meeting.

You cannot expect a very successful sales meeting outcome without listing down everything that you're going to say, how you’re going to say it, when you're going to say it, and whether you should ask a question or give a statement. Then, carefully practice before the meeting… and practice some more. Only then can you ensure that your performance during the meeting will be like that of the superstar actor.

When to use a script

My advice to you is always to use a script to get appointments, during a discovery meeting, during a pitch to a decision-maker, and during a closing meeting.

You absolutely cannot afford to go to a discovery meeting with an influencer without having memorized a written script with a clearly identified set of questions, which you should ask during the meeting. Your script should also include scenarios that you may have to use in case your assumptions are not validated, or if the influencer chose not to answer one of your questions, or gave you a vague statement which you can't count on or verify.

For example, if you ask an influencer confidential financial information such as their allocated budget to solve a problem, and the influencer hesitates to give you a definite answer, you have to have back up questions that can extract the same information with a less invasive question.

Here is an example to illustrate the above point:

"Mr. Robert, I understand that this is confidential information and I respect that you are not in a position to share this information with me, but can I ask you another question? Normally organizations that are similar to your size, what kind of budget do they allocate for such solutions considering the serious impact of the problem on their revenue and operations? Just give me a rough figure or a range. Would you say it's between $50,000 and $75,000?"

Should you change your script frequently?

I agree with the argument that you may change your dialogue and get out of the script you have memorized during a meeting to fit the natural discussion tone that is taking place. From my experience of attending hundreds of meetings with companies that are pitching their solutions to large organizations, I can spot within 10 seconds whether the person who is pitching to the decision-maker had practiced and rehearsed his pitch before the meeting, or just decided to show up to the meeting and take it as it comes. You can spot a professional salesperson within the first 10 seconds of him opening his mouth.

A professional salesperson should know precisely what to say, when to say it, how to say it, and how to put the right emotion into every single word that he is saying. Just like a celebrity actor, a professional salesperson focuses on the excitement and the way he tells his pitch rather than trying to remember the words of the pitch. Because he has already memorized the words of the script, he would then only focus on perfecting the emotion and body gesture attached to each word.

How to start a discovery meeting

Now that you've got the appointment to see the influencer, it is time to start preparing your questions for the meeting.

There are specific questions that the influencer is asking himself and wondering about before your meeting takes place, such as:

– Why do you want to meet him?

– What questions are you likely to ask him?

– Is he going to get into trouble if he answers your questions?

It is your responsibility, as soon as you enter the meeting room, to immediately remove all doubts, fear, lack of trust, and any missed ambiguity from the mind of the influencer. So, the obvious thing to do, as soon as the influencer enters a discovery meeting, is to answer the top three questions that are going through his mind. The more open and honest you are with the influencer about why you are conducting this research, the more help you will get, and the better the meeting outcome will be. And the better answers you will receive as a result of this discovery meeting.

So, let us go into more detail of how you should start a discovery meeting by giving a simple introduction using PowerPoint Slides (projected or printed).

The Introduction:

It would be best if you started the session by introducing yourself and other members of your team who are present. Also, you must thank the influencer for taking the time to see you. If someone has introduced you, you must thank them for his or her introductions. All of this is a sign of courtesy and proper business etiquette. So, make sure you mention them in any new meeting with an influencer.

Your objective here is to briefly describe what you do as a company, without an attempt to sell anything. Remember, your aim of a discovery meeting is not to sell, instead to gather information and validate your assumptions, that's all.

You could have a maximum of 5 PowerPoint slides that cover the following:

- Why you are here (the agenda of the meeting).

- Who you are (as a company).

- What you do (as a company).

- Why you do what you do.

- What will happen during and after the meeting. This slide is to clarify to the influencer what should he expect at the end of the meeting.

Action Steps:

1. Pull out the list of target people you need to meet, which you have created from the previous section, and next to each target person, write down the name of your friends, family, or personal business associates who are connected to the target person you want to meet. Use LinkedIn to verify their connection to your network.

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2. Write an introduction script. You can use my script or completely come up with your own. Just make sure you test it with friends and family before you use it with business associates. Make sure it works, and if it doesn't, keep refining it until it does. Then approach the introducer to ask for the introduction.

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How to Ask Discovery Meeting Questions

The Information Gathering Mode:

I have attended many discovery meetings with our partners, who always make a mistake of speaking more than listening. They start the meeting very well with an excellent introduction about who they are, what company they represent, and why they are here; but as soon as the influencer starts asking some basic questions about the product, the salesman cannot hold himself and gets into lots of unnecessary details about the product, the solution they provide, how it works, and whom did they sell it to, and why it is the best product in the world.

This is a big mistake, as your objective of the discovery meeting is not to sell your product; your aim in a discovery meeting is to gather information.

While conducting discovery meetings, do not speak more than one minute. Instead, ask questions and encourage the speaker to open up and give you more detailed information and insights. If you catch yourself speaking more than one minute, that means you have switched from an information-gathering mode to a salesperson mode. Do not do that! You are not conducting discovery meetings to sell, but to gather information. So, ask more questions and speak less about your solution. If you want a discovery meeting to be more successful, talk 20% of the time and listen 80% of the time.

What Type of Questions to Ask:

Your questions should never be close-ended questions. They should be open-ended, which always entices the influencer not to give you short answers. Instead, he gives you his point of view, feelings, opinions, and advice on how you can use the information to increase your chance of closing the deal with the decision-maker.

An example of a close-ended question is: “Does the CEO make decisions of this sort by himself independently or does he ask someone else to be involved?”

An open-ended question version of the same question sounds like this: “Mr. Smith, I was wondering how your CEO makes his decision about this topic. I'm sure, sometimes, your CEO makes decisions on his own without any assistance or advice from any of his influencers or senior management, and I'm sure in other cases, he involves other people to help him with the decision process. In your opinion, when do you think you see him choose to make decisions solely, and when does he make decisions involving other people? And for this type of problem, if you think he will likely involve other people, who do you think he will involve?”

See, on the open-ended type of question, you are not settling for short answers such as a simple “Yes” or a “No.” You are likely to get one of two reactions from the influencer: Either he will openly tell you the answer you are looking for or will try to be vague about it to avoid the question. A vague answer is something like this: “Well, it depends on the situation,” or “I am not sure, you will have to ask him that,” or “I don't think I can answer that question without guessing the answer,” and he stops at that.

If you receive such vague answers to your open-ended questions, it is your job to probe and dig deeper to find out more. Try to say this: “I see, can you tell me more about what kind of situation he makes decisions independently and what kind of situations he normally involves others? Also, who are the others that he would involve in our current situations?”

When you ask open-ended questions that start with when, what, where, who, and how; it is almost impossible for the person answering the questions to give you a short answer.

Notice that I've also used the phrase: “in your opinion,” in case the influencer is concerned that he would be revealing confidential information to you. If you see him hesitating to answer any question, say to him “Mr. Smith, I'm just asking about your own opinion, so it's a simple guess, even though you're not sure about the answer, it's okay. It is just your opinion. A guess.”

In this case, Mr. Smith has no choice but to start this sentence by saying, “Well, if you're asking for my opinion, then I would say…”

In discovery meetings, you need to be like a professional news reporter who is curious about finding the details of a good news story, or like a crime detective who would never settle for short answers that avoid answering the detective's question.

Remember, you are not there to sell anything, you are there to find out information, so don't be intimidated by the influencer's position. Do not hesitate to dig deeper to find out inside information, especially, if you have been introduced to the influencer by someone the influencer respects and does not want you to go back to the introducer and complain that the influencer was not helpful, or was not clear with the answers.

The Follow-Up:

It is common that one meeting may not be enough with an influencer to get all your questions answered or all your assumptions validated. You may need to meet with the person a second or a third time. If you do a round of meetings with different influencers in an organization, and it turns out that the first influencer gave you information that is vague and incomplete, and it requires more data to verify, then you must get introduced to other influencers and gather more data.

So, if you do a great job building rapport with an influencer, sometimes that influencer will become curious about your research findings and may extend an invitation for you to come back and see him again to share your results. I would use such invitation opportunity to ask the influencer if he would prefer to have the second meeting inside the organization in his office, or somewhere outside at a coffee shop, where we can spend more time with each other, and there are fewer interruptions during the meeting.

Business is about people, and the better the relationship you have with people whom you are conducting business with, the higher the chance of you building a stronger network of influential contacts who are eager to help you and support you in achieving your objectives. In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with building a relationship with people that you like, and like you as a person outside of an office environment. Where you can build a friendship and discuss and share your thoughts and ideas. As long as there is no conflict of interest, and you are not taking advantage of inside information that you are not supposed to know, or that could get the person who is sharing that information in trouble.

Remember, the information you're seeking is needed to validate the assumptions you have, and it's not to get confidential data. Any sensitive information that you may need, you are likely to receive it after you have signed a non-disclosure agreement with the organization with the blessings and approval of the decision-maker. More on this topic later during the POC stage in the coming chapters.

What Type of Questions to Ask:

There are two types of primary questions that you want to ask at a discovery meeting, the first primary set of questions is related to the problem, while the second type is related to the solution of the problem. We will discuss both of these areas of questions in detail in the following sections.

There are other vital questions, but they are considered secondary, these questions are related to the company, the people who would make the decision, and their influencers.

Let us start the next section about the secondary questions to get them out of the way so that we can focus more on the primary questions later on.

About the Target Company & the People Behind It

The Decision-Maker and Influencers:

A purchasing decision of a product or a service in a large organization is made by either a single decision-maker or a group of decision-makers. Your job is not only to find out who are the decision-makers but also who influences their decision. The identification of the decision-maker is probably the most important question you will ask the influencer in your first meeting at the company.

To get clear answers to the above, I like to ask the following questions as follows:

"Mr. Smith, in your opinion,

- Who would need to be involved in the decision of the problem at hand?

- What are their roles and titles?

- What are the departmental priorities at this time, or in three to six months from today?

- What are the issues, concerns, and motivating factors that could cause the decision-maker and his influencers to act?

- What type of relationship do other influencers have with the decision-maker, and with their colleagues who may have an impact on the decision?"

Your objective of asking the above questions is to find out what would be the influencer's position when it comes to the priority of the problem. And what are they likely to say to the decision-maker about whether this problem should be solved now, or at a later stage, or completely ignore it. Once you find out who the influencers are, make it a priority to set up meetings with them on a one-to-one basis, and try to find out what would motivate them to act in favor of solving the problem immediately and influencing the decision-maker positively.

The way you get the appointments with these influencers is to merely use the first influencer whom you are currently interviewing by asking him for an introduction at the end of the meeting. Again, you would have to use a very smartly written script to encourage that influencer to set up meetings for you. You should explicitly tell him what to say when he calls for the appointment.

Here is a sample script:

"Mr. Smith, can you do me a favor and call Mr. Peter to let him know that I will be very interested in meeting with him to discuss the matter? I only need 30 minutes, and I am happy to meet him at a location of his convenience any time early next week. If you can get his assistant's name and contact details, I will coordinate with her. Just tell Mr. Peter, who I am, and why I want to meet with him, and that I value his opinion on the matter. Thank you, Mr. Smith, I appreciate it."

Then wait for Mr. Smith to make that call while you are at his office. If you have not done so yet, at this time, hand over your business card to the influencer, and say: "Here is my business card in case you need the exact details of my title and contact details to pass to Mr. Peter." Then keep quiet and don't say a word until the influencer makes the call for you on the spot. If the influencer says to you that he will call him later, don't push; instead, politely ask him when you can call to follow up. Let him know that you will be chasing him for that appointment, so he knows that you are committed to meeting the next influencer early next week.

One last piece of advice here, before leaving the office of an influencer, ask if the influencer would like to know the findings or summary of all your meetings. Most people are curious, and they would want to know what other people say or think. So, most likely, their answer would be a "yes," in that case, you have assured yourself an open invitation to go back to any of the influencers and meet them a second time. Usually, a second meeting is constructive in validating any information or assumptions you will build after you complete your rounds of discovery meetings.

Questions About the Company:

There are three areas which you need to find out about the target company:

1) Company Demographics

2) Company Structure

3) Company Behavior

Let me share with you how to ask the right questions for each of these three areas:

The Company Demographics:

Part of doing intensive market research through discovery meetings is to identify the ideal customers for your product or solution by creating a laser-focused ideal customer profile. One of the essential criteria in this profile is the demographics; which include the type, the sector, the size, and the location of the company. Remember, your objective is not to waste your time speaking to every single company who has money and who can afford to buy your product. You should only invest your time to meet companies that fit your ideal customer criteria.

Here is a small script which you could use:

"Mr. Smith, on your Wikipedia page, it shows that you have 2,700 employees? But I am not sure how accurate that is considering the size of the building we are in right now. It seems that you have a lot more than 2,700 at this location!

Once you have received that answer, you should immediately follow it up with another question. "Oh, wow. 4,600 employees, so it's more than Wikipedia says, I thought the information on Wikipedia would be outdated. Thank you for confirming that. And Mr. Smith, are all of these 4,600 employees working in one location, or are they working in other locations and buildings?"

The psychology of the way you ask the question plays a significant role in getting the answers you seek. Notice how I asked the question in a way that blames someone else for giving you the wrong information, and you are merely trying to verify three pieces of information in one single shot. Make sure that the way you ask the question is not perceived as if it's an interrogating question; it should be more of a conversational style.

You always want to sound like a curious, admiring, and friendly person, and not someone who is a wicked, sharp, and shark-like interrogator. Your objective throughout the whole discovery meeting is to gain trust and make the influencer become more comfortable as the meeting progresses. The more relaxed and comfortable he gets, the more information he will be willing to share.

The Company Structure:

Your objective in asking a structure-related question is to find out how the company is structured, and how the management teams make decisions.

- Is it centralized management or very flat?

- Do they always go to the CEO or the C suite for similar buying decisions?

- Do they have committees and groups that make decisions in a group format which then raises recommendations to the C suite?

Again, be very careful and spend a reasonable amount of time before the meeting writing the exact words and phrases in a script. Practice the tonality that you will use in asking these questions. Remember, you want to sound friendly, natural, and curious.

One way to put the influencer at ease when asking these questions is by giving an example of your own company or a model for other companies that you have visited and the way they make decisions.

Here is an example:

"Mr. Smith, in many companies I have met in Dubai, I have noticed that the way they make decisions is by a department head going directly to the C suite, stating the problem, and then the Chief Executive would give the instructions to investigate the problem and come up with possible solution options. How is it like in your company? For the problem we are discussing, would you guys make decisions as a group, committees, or does the CEO usually decide?"

As you will notice that I have asked the question with an open ending using "how." Never ask a close-ended question in a discovery meeting if your objective is to have the influencer open up and share information rather than a simple Yes/No answer.

The Company Behavior:

Your objective here is to find out what is the current problem-solving process or decision-making process in the organization. You will be surprised to know that many large organizations do not have a transparent process to go about investigating a problem, especially if the problem is new and has never been encountered previously. They would not have a transparent process of what they should consider in solving the problem, studying the solution options, or even inviting solution-providers to submit their recommendations. And even if they do invite solution-providers, they would not know how to go about selecting the right one.

In such organizations, your role should shift from being a solution provider to an advisor and a consultant who will educate them and help clarify a transparent process of how to do all of the above. Only after you have gained their trust as an advisor, they will be more willing to accept your suggestion for a solution, and it could be your solution.

You also need to find out about what is the company's current innovation appetite. High-innovation-appetite companies will be used to solving new problems very swiftly. Low-innovation appetite-companies would shy away from addressing the issue immediately and choose to ignore it and allow it to grow; until they are forced to find a solution when the problem’s impact becomes intolerable.

Trend-Setters vs. Lagers:

Is the company you're dealing with a trend-setter or are they more like followers and lagers?

Your objective is always to choose to work with target customers who are competitive. Choose to work with companies who want to set trends and not follow others. There is little hope in working with companies that require you to spend a lot of time educating them on how they need to be very innovative in the way they solve problems for their clients and customers. If the culture in the organization is already against taking any risk, setting new trends, or innovating anything new, then your job of closing the deal with such lagers will be much harder to accomplish. So, why bother. Time is money, invest it elsewhere with someone who will appreciate what you are offering.

Your role is to help the organization to choose a solution option; it is not to convince them to solve the problem. If they don't have a reason to solve their problem, don't try to persuade them to do so. You will waste a lot of time working and not succeeding. Take it from my experience in dealing with hundreds of such lagers. It is much easier to give birth than to revive the dead.

Answers to the above questions about the decision-making process, the innovation appetite, and whether the company is a trendsetter or a lager will demonstrate whether you are talking to the right ideal customer, or if you are wasting your time with the wrong customer.

The Order is not Essential:

You don't have to ask the above questions in a specific order. It is okay to mix and match your questions, so it doesn't sound like you are interrogating the person sitting opposite you. It's okay to jump from one area to another to make the meeting more conversational rather than formal.

For example, you could ask two questions in a completely different and separate order like this: "Mr. Smith, are you saying that the CFO involves Peter and John in the decision only if the amount of the losses exceeds $2 million? By the way, before you answer that, do you guys follow a specific decision-making process or do you sit casually and discuss the problem and its potential solutions?"

As you may have noticed, I have asked a situational question about when does the CFO involve his influencers, and I immediately followed it up and asked a behavioral question about their decision-making process. Write the questions script the way you are comfortable with as long as it sounds natural and friendly and non-interrogating.

Action Steps:

1. For your product, what questions can you come up with to ask the influencers about the company and the people behind it? Use some of the above questions or come up with your own. Make sure they are open-ended questions.

2. Write a script which you can use to ask each question. Be a smart tactful interviewer. Ask the question with a tone of curiosity and without sounding like a police investigator. Practice your script with friends and family and get some feedback on it. You can also use your mobile voice recorder to listen to how you sound. Make sure you look and sound natural and at ease.

About the Problem

Getting answers to the first set of primary questions.

A big mistake I often notice salespeople make, as they approach a new customer, is that they always assume that this customer has a problem which their solution solves. Many times, this is not necessarily the case. Not every qualified customer needs you. It is crucial that before you start selling your solution, you need to ask the customer specific questions to validate your assumption, whether the problem exists, its size, the pain it is causing, and the urgency to fix it.

Let me share with you some advice on how to ask these questions to get the best outcome you seek:

1. The existence of the problem:

If you directly ask a new customer: Do you have a problem in your company? The answer would be, "Absolutely not!" The way you verify whether the problem exists is not by asking directly, but by looking for the symptoms of the problem.

Take this example; let us assume that you are selling productivity software. It would be foolish to go to the HR manager and ask: "Mr. Smith, just like any other company, I am sure you are suffering from lack of productivity of your staff as they waste much time in their day doing things that are ineffective or inefficient, am I right?" His answer to you would be: "Absolutely not! I think our employees are very productive, efficient, and effective in the way they use their time. Why wouldn't they be? Are you indicating that we have hired the wrong people who are wasting their time all-day long?"

A better way to ask the same question without offending the HR manager is by probing and looking for evidence that the company currently has problems you can solve. If you find out the company has no tools that measure productivity or to monitor employee tasks, you know you are on the right path. Your apparent goal is to find the symptoms of obvious time and money wastage.

Here is how you could ask it: “Mr. Smith, can I ask you a question which I am curious to know? When a manager in your company assigns a task to his employees, how does the manager monitor the progress of that task? Is it by following up regularly with the employee or via email? Alternatively, does he track the employee by using any productivity tracking tool?”

This question was smartly structured to allow the customer to inform you that it is perfectly okay to be inefficient and ineffective in the way a manager assigned the task to their employees. The first answer allows the customer the comfort of openly stating that they are not using a productivity software in assigning tasks to their employees and just use the traditional method of verbally giving instructions and setting a deadline with no tool to monitor the productivity of the staff.

If you attack the customer by indirectly implying to him that he does not know what he is doing and he is inefficient and ineffective as an HR manager, he will be reluctant to admit he does not need any change or improvement. However, if you allow the customer to comfortably admit that he is using the first method without any embarrassment or defensiveness, you would then have a much more honest answer about the existence of the symptoms of the problem in the company. You should then probe and dig deeper by asking more questions about some of the challenges of not using productivity software.

2. Size and timing do matter:

As we stated in the previous chapters, the bigger the problem, the more substantial the opportunity for you as a solution-provider.

Estimating the size of the problem during the discovery meeting is a crucial task and objective which you must master, especially if the customer himself has no idea of how big the problem is and how much it's hurting him.

There are generally four types of problems in a company:

1) A problem that is big and is hurting the company.

2) A problem that is big but the pain is not being felt by the company.

3) A problem that is small, and has some pain associated with it.

4) A problem that is small, and has no pain at all.

Your best bet is to find customers that have the first type of problems: a customer who has a big problem which is hurting them a lot.

Timing is key. If you approach a company at a time where they've just recognized that they have a big painful problem and they are losing a lot of money, the sales cycle in that situation will be much faster. The decision-making process will be rapid since the company is hurting and losing a lot of money. However, these types of companies that are in this situation are likely to not consider your solution as the only solution and may seek to find alternatives by doing a tender, which may result in you being merely one of the many options among other service providers.

The ideal situation for you is to find a company that has a big problem, but they are not yet aware of the magnitude of the losses that they're incurring as a result of the problem. Your timing in approaching this company will be very much advantageous to you, as you will be considered a sharp solution-provider; who not only has found a big problem in the company that no one else has noticed; you also have come at the right time to educate them about the size of the problem. When you describe the pain that they will likely feel if the problem is not solved right now, they will be more inclined to answer your questions. Just like a doctor describing to this patient how the pain will increase in the future if the treatment is delayed or ignored, and how delaying the treatment will prevent the patient from living a normal life in the near future.

Whether you find the first type of company or the second type, it is apparent that you should not waste a lot of time engaging companies that don’t have a significant problem. Your focus should be on companies with big problems who are feeling the pain, or they're not feeling it. In either case, the problem is enormous and cannot be ignored; otherwise, someone will get fired for not solving it.

In case the customer is unaware of the size of the problem, you must ask the right question during a discovery meeting to reveal to you the extent of the problem. An excellent way to estimate the size of the problem is by asking the following:

- Who is the problem impacting? A group of employees, a department, or even a specific customer segment.

- How much is the problem affecting them?

- How long has it been impacting them?

The larger the segment of the people that are hurting, the longer it has been impacting them, and the higher the amount of money lost; the bigger the size of the problem will be, and the more pain will be associated with it.

I once attended a meeting with a Japanese company whom we were assisting in conducting discovery meetings in Abu Dhabi. I noticed that the representative of the Japanese company completely lost control of the meeting with the head of procurement, and started to ask the wrong questions to the influencer. So, I jumped in and asked the influencer the following:

Me: “Pardon me for interrupting John, I am curious about something. You indicated earlier that because you don’t have enough people to check the data, you are probably losing $4 to $5 per customer. Is that loss per year or month?

John: “Yep, that’s $4 per month per customer. However, that’s insignificant to the $540 monthly fee each customer is paying us. It is not a big amount if you come to think of it.”

Me: “Yes, you are right; it is less than 1% of the customer’s monthly fee. Let me ask you another question, John. How long does a customer normally stay with your company, on average?”

John: “Oh, I would say between 4 to 5 years on average. It's actually 4.7 years as per our last annual report.”

Me: “Wow. 4.7 years, that’s great! You sure know how to take care of them and make sure they stick to you and not switch to your competitors. So how many customers do you guys have? I heard between 1 to 1.5 million according to an interview with your CEO on Bloomberg, is that number correct or has it changed now?”

John: “It’s actually 1.2 million customers.”

Me: “Oh, wow, that many, that’s great. By the way, John, how many people do you have working for you in your department? You seem to have a large team. I am impressed!”

John: “Well, not that many, just ….”

I ended the above meeting with precisely enough information to build an excellent case for the decision-maker. After 2 weeks, I took the same Japanese company to meet the decision-maker of that company, and we convinced him to allow us to do a POC, which was successfully conducted in 17 days, and the Japanese company won a contract of $65m for one country, and 5 more countries will be awarded to them subsequently, for a total of $310m.

Let me share with you what I did with the discovery meeting answers which I collected from John the influencer.

I simply assumed that if the problem is impacting 1.2 million customers, and it has been impacting them for more than four years, and each customer costs them $48 per year; a simple multiplication would reveal to you that the problem is costing this company $230m as follows:

1,200,000 customers x $48 per year x 4 years = $230 million of wasted money to date.

The above sounds like a significant problem, which the company should be very eager to solve; however, because the amount per month per customer is as low as 4 dollars, this problem may have been going on for four years unnoticed.

If you have noticed, when the influencer shared with me the fragmented data, I could have jumped at the opportunity and revealed to the influencer the real size of the problem, who apparently is underestimating the magnitude of the problem; instead, I kept my mouth shut, and asked more questions.

You should not reveal to an influencer who is heading a department, that department may well be the cause of the problem. Instead, whatever conclusion you reach out of collecting data in discovery meetings, you should reveal them only to the decision-maker during the pitch meeting. Otherwise, the influencer may become extremely protective of giving you more information if you show him that you have reached a particular conclusion which is against his best interest or expose him as being incompetent. The best way is not to give any conclusions and merely to continue to ask questions which sometimes are not related to one another; similar to the last question

I asked about the number of people in the influencer's department, which has nothing to do with the $4 loss per month per customer.

My advice is, not to rush to share your conclusions and findings. You will have a chance to be a superhero in front of the decision-maker as you reveal your results, which may surprise all the influencers of how you have successfully been able to reach such conclusions from data that has been in front of their eyes for years.

3. The cost of inactivity:

A straightforward way to calculate the negative impact the problem has on a decision-maker's company is by calculating how much it costs the company not to decide to solve the problem immediately. The bigger the problem, the longer it will take to address it. So, the more significant the pain, and the bigger the losses the company would have.

If a decision-maker delays or avoids approving a proposal using excuses such as:

- They need to think about it
- Don't have the budget to buy it
- The solution is not on their priority list at this time
- They have more important things to do

You should persuade the decision-maker that delaying the decision will do more harm than good. Remind him that there is a cost for his indecision, and the problem cannot be left unsolved, as it will continue to hurt the company if not acted upon.

The way to calculate the cost of inactivity is by using a simple multiplication formula. You multiply the losses per day, per week, or month by the number of days the decision-maker chooses not to solve the problem. If the cost is increasing as time passes, then the cost of inactivity or delaying the decision to solve the problem would be much higher than if it's decreasing per week or month.

4. The urgency to fix the problem:

If the urgency to fix the problem is not there because the decision-maker has other priorities, you need to bring into the meeting all the influencers whom you have met during the discovery meeting to help you in persuading the decision-maker.

The influencer's role will be to change the priorities of the decision-maker and change the urgency direction of the company and point it towards fixing the problem. Only then, will your pitch to the decision-maker be much more effective. They need to help you convince the decision-maker that the problem must be fixed, and the decision to fix it may not be delayed further as the status quo cannot be continued unresolved.

Failure to convince the decision-maker to prioritize the urgency of fixing the problem will reduce your chance of closing the deal. My advice to you is not to underestimate the importance of having the right influences in the room with the decision-maker. These influencers may be asked to give their opinion about the problem, its magnitude, whether they have alternative options to solve the problem, or whether the issue can be ignored for now. If you have not done a good job during the discovery stage, you will not even know which influencers should be invited to the pitch meeting with the decision-maker who could influence the decision positively to approve the POC.

Action Steps:

1. For your product, what questions can you come up with to ask the influencers about:

- The existence of the problem?
- How big is the problem? How much is it hurting the company?
- How are you planning to measure the cost of inactivity for not solving the problem? Prepare your questions smartly. Decide how are you going to ask the questions?
- What questions will you ask to determine the urgency to fix the problem?

Use some of the above questions or come up with your own. Make sure they are open-ended questions.

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2. Write a script which you can use to ask each question.

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About the Solution

Getting Answers to the Second Set of Primary Questions: After asking lots of discovery questions about the problem, your aim now is to dig deeper into the possible solutions which the customer may consider.

I have seen many companies make the mistake of presenting their previously-built solution to the decision-maker without understanding the vision of a possible solution which a customer may already have in his mind. The first thing I would do after I have finished all my questions related to a problem a company may be facing, is getting into the mind of the influencer during a discovery meeting to identify his vision of a possible solution.

I always use the following six questions to extract that vision out of the influencer's mind:

1. Has there been any attempts to solve the problem? Your objective here is not to insult the influencer in case he answers you with a straight "No." Instead, if he has responded to you that there have been no attempts whatsoever to solve the problem, you must downplay it and convey that you are sure they were busy, and there were other priorities at that time. Nevertheless, you should remind the influencer that the problem size has now grown so much, and this problem cannot be ignored due to its significant impact on the company. It should be a priority and must be acted on.

However, if he informs you that there have been attempts to solve the problem, you need to dig deep to find out the reasons why these attempts have failed; and what lessons have they learned from these experiments. You should also find out if the team responsible for executing these attempts has given up or continues to solve the problem using the same options at hand.

2. What options will be considered to solve it?

If there were no attempts to solve the problem, you should ask this question to find out what are the likely options that will be available to the company to solve the problem. Ask who the people are that suggested these options. What would be their role in executing these solution options? And whether there is a budget for these options to be tested to solve the problem.

Your primary objective here is to find out who are the people that will fight for these options in front of the decision-maker during the pitch meeting. It would be best if you made it mandatory for you to meet each of these people who are likely to recommend these possible solutions to the decision-maker. Try to fully understand their strong and weak arguments behind their recommendation of a possible solution to the problem at hand.

3. Which of these options will likely be eliminated and why?

Your objective here is to understand the opinion of the influencers about which he firmly believes stand a good chance of being accepted as a possible solution to the problem. What are the other options which he thinks will not stand a chance to be considered by the decision-maker? You also need to understand the reasons behind the influencer's opinion so that you can assess whether these reasons are strong or weak.

4. What is the most critical decision factor in selecting the best option?

In this question, your objective is to highlight what this specific influencer considers the most crucial factor or key in solving the problem. Whatever the answer, the influencer will give you, you have to ask why. Many people state opinions without strong reasons behind them. The more you understand the reason why someone says or does something, the better you'll appreciate their mentality, determination, and the way they make decisions. That does not mean that whatever they say or do is always correct; it just means that the driver behind their words and actions is their strong "why." Make it your mission to know the "why" of each influencer for each solution option, so that you can easily influence each of them to consider an alternative possibility, which may be your proposed solution.

Remember, you will not try to sell these influencers on your solution during the discovery meetings; instead, you will only collect the insights from them about their proposed options for a solution. It is during the decision-maker pitch meeting where you may be required to influence the influencers to consider your solution positively instead of their alternative options.

5. What should be the ideal solution's must-have and nice-to-have features?

Ask the influencer to list what, in their opinion, the "must-have" and "nice-to-have" set of features of the ideal solution. Don't forget to ask "why." Not every feature is mandatory. We've discussed this in depth in the previous chapters.

6. What would be the critical steps in executing a solution, and what would be the ideal time frames?

Most likely, your influencers will not have a clear execution plan of their proposed solution, nor they would have the ideal time frames; since most of them have not likely considered the perfect solution in such details. Usually, their solution option is more of a wish than a real thought-through solution.

The weaker the solution these influencers are recommending, the higher your chance that your solution would be distinguished and stand out as a much better fit in solving the problem.

Action Steps:

1. For your product, will you use the same above questions to ask about the possible solutions the company has considered to resolve the problem? Feel free to come up with your own questions that suit your market or industry. Make sure they are open-ended questions.

2. Write a script that you can use to ask each question.

Next Steps:

Once you are finished asking the above six questions, you can move on to find out if the influencers have any idea about how they will find a vendor or a supplier who will execute and deliver their proposed solution to the problem. Also, find out if they will be following a specific and detailed buying process in selecting the right vendor.

This buying process is the topic of our next section.

The Buying Process

What stage are they in their buying process?

Many companies may not have a buying process and may never have thought of creating one, especially for a problem that they don't know they have. So, the likelihood of them knowing where they are in a buying process is not going to be easy to answer. The first thing you should do is find out whether they follow a specific buying process. If they do, then you should look out for symptoms and signs to find out what stage of their buying process they are at. Your role as an expert advisor and a solution-provider will change as the customer moves from one buying stage to another.

Let me elaborate with an example:

If you meet a customer at a time when he admits that he has a massive problem he wishes to solve in the next 60 days and estimates it will cost $10 million. Then his priority at that time is not to seek an expert to educate him about the problem and its causes; instead, it would be to find an expert to assist him in putting down the criteria of selecting the best solution.

So, if you don't know what stage of the buying process they are at, you may risk losing them if you talk to them about the importance of solving the problem when they have already passed that stage of the buying process.

Here is a simpler example:

Let's say you're planning to buy a car, so you go to the showroom but you're not sure whether you should buy a Mercedes, BMW, or an Audi; so, you start your buying journey by visiting the first showroom of a Mercedes dealer. You are still not sure whether you should buy Mercedes or not; ideally, the role of the salesperson is to ask you probing questions to identify where you are in the buying journey by asking you the following: "So, Mr. Customer, have you made up your mind about buying a Mercedes? Or are you also considering other makes of German cars?"

As soon as you answer him that you are also considering a BMW or an Audi as alternative options, the salesperson should immediately explain to you that 76.8% of car buyers choose to buy a Mercedes instead of buying a BMW or an Audi. Then he would explain why the majority of buyers choose a Mercedes over the competitor. Once you are convinced that Mercedes is going to be the brand of your next car, then the salesperson should move you down the buying journey to educate you about the different Mercedes models and help you choose the best model.

In this example, you, as the buyer, were in two stages, the first one was deciding which German car to buy, and the second stage was which Mercedes model to buy. The role of a salesperson changes at every stage of the buying journey. At the initial stage, his role should not be bombarding the customer with presentations describing every feature of every product a company has; instead, it is about identifying the needs of the customer by asking lots of questions. The answers to these probing questions will ultimately lead the salesman to pick the best option of a car that fits the customer's needs. Then he describes that single option in more detail and guides the customer to decide to buy.

Every buying process is similar, yet different. Different industries have different buying processes. Once you identify the buying journey of your customer in your industry, then you should align yourself and decide what role are you going to play at each buying stage.

Your role could be one of the following roles at different stages:

1) To educate.

2) To amplify the customer's need to change.

3) To influence the criteria of selecting a solution.

4) To persuade the decision-maker that your product is the best option among all the other available solution providers.

5) To educate the decision-maker about the priority of fixing the problem and not delaying it, considering the ongoing high cost of inactivity.

Each of the above roles, which you could play as a solution-provider, will largely depend on where the buyer is in the buyer's journey.

If you are not sure which stage the customer's at in the buying journey, you must not try to sell or share information with the customer based on assumptions. Instead, you must ask the customer more questions to find out where the customer exactly is in the buyer's journey, and accordingly adjust your role and script. You could be an educator to your customer, an amplifier, an influencer, a persuader, or an advisor who helps the customer at every single stage of the journey.

Never use the same sales script, presentation slides, or other sales tools for all customers. Customize sales tools and scripts for different types of customers and various tools for each stage of the buyer's journey. For example, if you have three types of customers and each customer goes thru five steps of the buyer's journey, you should develop a total of 15 sales scripts to cover each stage for each customer.

The Money

Availability of Funds:

This is an apparent must-have priority which you should promptly clarify during the discovery meeting. You have to ask the influencer whether the company has allocated a budget to solve the problem at hand.

There is no point in you pitching to a company that cannot afford to buy your solution. There is however a strong point in finding out whether the company has the funds, but these funds have been allocated for other projects of a low-priority. In such cases, your objective would be to identify the influencers who can influence the decision-maker to shift the funds from a low-priority project to your project.

You can achieve this by demonstrating to the decision-maker how not solving the problem would have a significant cost if the problem continues to remain unresolved—your aim to make the urgency and importance of addressing the issue much higher than any other project which has a budget. I will discuss this in more detail in the coming pages.

The way you would find out about the availability of funds for other projects is not just asking about the funds but asking about the current plans that the company is committed to executing in the next 12 months. Once you identify the projects which are allocated a budget, you aim to explore the urgency, importance, the financial impact if these projects are delayed. If your discovery meeting reveals that specific projects are nice-to-do and have been approved to improve certain areas within the company, which if they are can be delayed, differed, or canceled, they will not negatively harm the company.

Then you should find out about the exact budget allocated for these projects and immediately identify who are the decision-makers and influencers of these unimportant projects. Connect with them to get their feedback on how important the project is to them and what happens if the project is deferred, delayed, or canceled. You want to merely gauge their level of interest in seeing that these projects see the light.

You would be surprised to know that many influencers do not strongly feel the urgency to implement specific projects under their department. Many of these managers would usually be happy to delay these projects. Some of the common reasons for this is that most department heads or influencers, are overloaded with other projects of high importance, understaffed, or don't have enough resources to execute the projects.

During the pitch, if the decision-maker raises an objection that the company does not have the budget to buy the solution you are proposing, that's when you explain to the decision-maker that the budget is actually available with other departments that have less urgent projects. He will obviously ask you about the source of your information; you can tell him that you have done your homework.

Be an advisor, not a salesperson:

As you can see from the above, your role in selling to a large organization is not to merely show up and pitch to decision-makers; instead, your purpose is to solve any problem that could delay or block your efforts in sealing the deal. The more information you're armed with, the better prepared you will be in handling any objection a decision-maker may raise.

If you don't do thorough homework by conducting good discovery meetings and asking the right questions to gather the intelligence needed to be ready for the pitch meeting; then you will be likely shot down by the decision-maker who would hit you with so many objections, either directly from him or from his influences, as to why your solution to solve their problem is not urgent or does not have the highest priority at the time of your pitch. Selling solutions to a large organization can be time-consuming and complicated; however, at the end of the day, you are simply dealing with people. People are emotional and logical. If you master the skill of using logic and influencing the emotions of the people at these large organizations, you will learn the art of closing big deals to large organizations with ease.

Don't get intimidated:

Do not allow the size of these organizations to intimidate you in any way or form. You have a reliable weapon in your hand, which is a solution that is a painkiller and a cure to a large problem that's hurting them every single day and costing them tons of money. Do not worry about how small your company is; instead, look at how significant the problem you are solving is, how urgently it must be resolved, and how much the organization needs you.

Decision-makers and influencers in large organizations want to solve their company's problems to show the shareholders and customers that they care and that they're doing their job. If you show up well-prepared with the aim of helping them solve these significant problems, and help them look good in front of their customers and stakeholders, then there is no reason why you would be brushed off and not be taken seriously, especially if you are approaching these organization at a time when they need your painkillers and solutions the most.

Your role in your job is to approach the right people, at the perfect time, ask good questions, gather insightful information, and then custom build your pitch and make it laser-focused on solving the big problems, so it becomes a no-brainer for the decision-makers to decide favorably and purchase your solution and move forward based on your recommendations. Just make sure that they have the needed funds to pay you by using some of the above methods on how to find money from other budgeted projects.

The main lesson here is: if the company has money, it is your job to help the decision-maker find the money and change its direction towards your company.

Action Steps:

1. For your product, prepare a set of questions to ask the influencers about:

- The projects they are working on in the next 12 months.

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- The priority of these projects.

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- The allocated funds for the projects.

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- The decision-makers of these projects.

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Make sure all of these questions are open-ended questions. Don't sound like a detective. They are financial-related questions. Most people will hesitate to share such information with a stranger, so sound natural and act merely curious.

2. Write a script which you can use to ask each question.

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The Competition

Are you done with research?

After you have finished with your customer's interviews, what should you do next? Influencers to the decision-maker are not the only people that you need to interview to complete your market research. The most critical group of people you need to visit, interview, and ask lots of questions to are your competitors. A good marketer would never consider market research complete without doing competitor analysis.

I don't believe that proper competitive analysis can be done by just sitting at your desk doing research online by visiting your competitors' website, and by doing a SWOT analysis of your competitors. You must get out of the office and visit your competitors, and if possible, buy and test their products or services. If you can't buy your competitor's products, then act like an interested buyer.

Some people may disagree with this approach about meeting your competitors and acting as a customer; I am not here to tell you that this approach is ethically right or wrong. This is not a book about ethics in business. This book is about gathering all the information that you need to prepare yourself better for decision-maker meetings. Moreover, if gathering competitive information to differentiate yourself from your competitors in the local market is of crucial importance for you to close the deal, then I do encourage you to go ahead and gather as much information as possible about your competitors.

Also, if this is going to be a debatable issue that may cause me negative publicity, so be it. I am not here to gain popularity. I'm writing this book to help every single person who has an excellent product to sell to the target customers.

Two Types of Competitors

1. Direct Competition:

These are competitors who compete with you directly and sell the same product you sell. They provide the same service you provide. Their prices are very close and similar to your rates, and they are most likely targeting the same customers that you target. With these competitors, you will need to visit them and ask questions related to how they sell their products and services to a typical customer.

Anticipate all the questions that a typical customer would ask when purchasing the same product and services that you and your competitor are selling, such as:

- What problem do you solve?
- How do you solve this problem? What are the benefits of your solution?
- What does your solution not do?
- How does your solution work?
- Who else is offering the solution in the market?
- What makes your solution product stand out among your competition?
- What is it that you do that your competitor is not doing or cannot do or imitate you in the future?
- What is your price? Is your price competitive?
- How would you react if I go to your competitors and ask them to give me the same price?
- How do you deliver your solution?
- What support can you give me if I buy your product or solution?

- What kind of foreign teasing guarantees can you assure me which will increase my confidence in buying your product?
- What do I lose if I don't buy your product now?
- Who in the market has purchased your product and was very happy with it? Can you give me some references?
- Have you ever failed in delivering what you have promised to your customers because of something that you have been unable to provide?
- Do you have any disputes with any of your customers?
- Is there anything that I should know while I'm out there shopping for a competitive product from other companies like yours?
- If you were my consultant, what should be my criteria to choose the best company that can solve my problem without any worries or concerns that they may fail?
- What are the items and specifications that I should watch out for when selecting a supplier or solution provider?

The above are some of the questions that you can ask depending on your industry, product, the number of competitors in the market, and other market-related conditions that you will find in the local market that you're trying to sell to. You will be shocked at some of the answers you will receive during your competitive analysis. As much as I was shocked to know how many companies don't visit their competitors, try their product or services, or ask target customers if they ever bought anything from their competitors, and whether they are all pleased about the buying experience.

It would be best if you don't attend a discovery meeting without having a colleague with you taking notes, so you can focus your full attention on the person that you are interviewing. Whatever information you gather in your competitive visit, make sure you take the time after the meeting to carefully study the notes. You can't afford to miss any critical information that would differentiate you from your competitors.

Your target customer is very likely to conduct the same interview and ask the same above questions to your competitor, so it makes sense for you to attend these competitor interviews ahead of your customer so you can show your customer that you are fully aware and knowledgeable about your competitors offer and how you stand out.

Action Steps:

1. For your product, who are some of your direct competitors?

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2. How are you planning to approach these direct competitors? Have a strategy. Write it down below.

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3. What questions are you going to ask. Pick some of the above, or come up with your own questions.

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Make sure all the questions are open-ended questions. Sound like a curious customer.

4. Write a script which you can use to ask each question.

2. Indirect Competitors: Your Supplier and Other Solution Providers

These would be companies that are providing a similar product to what you are selling, but there is a clear distinction between your product and theirs. Their product may be of a different category, price, specifications, functions, and capabilities. However, these indirect competitors could be an option that your target customer may consider if he is not well-informed on what is the best solution to his problem. Therefore, I strongly recommend that you visit and conduct interviews and discovery meetings with all types of competitors direct and indirect.

Your Local Suppliers:

Even though your local suppliers don't compete with you directly since they provide part of your full solution, these suppliers could be an excellent source of information and market data. They could be local or international suppliers who may have supplied some of their products or materials to the local market that you are targeting. They may have experiences and advice about how to conduct business in the market, or they have dealt previously with your target customer but sold them different products. They may have supplied your competitors with materials and services who have sold to your target customer.

Your objective of interviewing these suppliers is to find out what it’s like to deal with the target customer’s purchasing process, decision-making process, influencer’s personality and behavior, and everything that you can learn about from the influencers to the decision-makers.

A basic rule of thumb is that you should interview and question anyone who has dealt with your customer or your competitor.

1. Ask about some of the dos and don'ts.

2. What are the things to watch out for?
3. How to increase your chance of closing the deal.
4. Who are the influencers that you did not speak to yet?
5. Who from the management team has a significant impact on any decision made in the target company?

Please do not leave any stone unturned when it comes to conducting discovery meetings. It would be best if you met with every person who may have valuable insights, information, data, advice, or even connections that can link you to the target customer or can prepare you better for a meeting with the decision-maker.

Action Steps:

1. For your product, who are some of your direct suppliers that you can approach for help to know more about your target customer, their purchasing process, decision-making process, …etc.?

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2. What questions are you going to ask? Pick some of the above or come up with your own questions.

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The Experts

Industry Experts:

Your market research would not be complete without speaking with industry experts and advisors, who may have provided consultancy services to the same target customer. However, your approach to these experts should be carefully crafted so that you do not make them feel they are violating any confidentiality agreement signed with the target customer by them revealing information to you.

The way to approach such experts is by revealing to them that you are conducting market research, and you are trying to find out as much information as possible about how you go about crafting your market-entry strategy before approaching the target customer. Please do not ask them directly to reveal information which may be confidential; instead, ask for their advice. Here are some examples of questions you could ask the experts:

- Confirm if you are following the right strategy to enter the market.
- How to deal with the target customer, so you increase your chances of closing a deal.
- How to find the right angles to approach the decision-maker.
- Who are the influencers of the decision-makers?
- How to pitch to the decision-makers.

My advice to you is not to approach industry experts at the beginning of your market research; instead, leave this conversation until the end after completing all of your influencers, competitors, suppliers, and non-competitors interviews. Only then, your meeting with these experts will be more productive. Armed with information and data you have gathered from previous conversations, your core focus of the experts' interviews will be to validate this information and data.

Local Culture Experts:

You should partner with local culture coaches to conduct workshops and train your staff on cultural norms, dos and don’ts, business etiquette, negotiation tactics, trust-building methods, conflict-avoiding advice, and customer relationship practices. This training will increase your chance of succeeding in doing business in the local foreign market.

I find it insane to go to a new market that has an entirely different culture and underestimate the importance of having a full understanding and implementation of the right way of conducting business. It shocks me to see that many foreign companies hire foreign salespeople to represent their brand in a new international market. These foreign companies surprisingly hire a foreign salesperson who may have never worked in this market, so he does not understand its cultures, does not speak the language, and does not understand the religion,. How could he possibly sell well and meet the company’s target?

Put Yourself in my Shoes:

Imagine that I would come to your country with my sales team, who doesn’t speak your language, never sold a thing in your market; yet we try to convince you that we are a new supplier whom you should trust, buy our product, and believe everything that we promise you without knowing us. What are the chances of my company competing and taking market share from an existing local supplier, which you have dealt with for years, whom you are comfortable with, and you have already built a great trusting relationship with? Correct, the chances of me as a newcomer in winning business is not that great.

I have seen and attended many meetings where the number one reason why a deal was not closed was due to a culturally-related mistake committed by the foreign salesperson.

My advice to you is never to underestimate the skills development that you and your staff need to build to improve your cultural understanding of how to do business in a local foreign market. Therefore, it is imperative that you seek the advice of local culture experts before approaching any target customer. Even better, I advise you to hire a local salesperson to represent you in any foreign market—someone who knows how to deal with local decision-makers.

Action Steps:

1. For your product, who are some of the industry experts you can approach to help you craft your market-entry strategy?

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2. Who are some of the local culture experts who you can approach to help you understand the local cultural aspects?

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3. What questions are you going to ask? Pick some of the above, or come up with your own questions.

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The Meetings

How many meetings should you have?

You should have at least conducted 30 to 50 meetings of target customers, competitors, suppliers, noncompetitive suppliers, and business and culture experts. Anything less than that would give you inaccurate data which may not be enough to validate all the assumptions you have about the market or the target customer.

A Lot of Work:

Yes, of course, it is a lot of work, what else did you expect? Did you hope to walk into a decision-maker's room and pull out your PowerPoint slides deck and present your product and have the decision-maker fall in love with your product and say: "This is fantastic, let's do it. I would love to buy your product now. When can you deliver?"

The world has changed, and the way you are used to selling in the last 30 years does not work anymore. Now, the decision-makers are much more educated, sophisticated, well-informed, and knowledgeable.

Educate your customer about the competition.

As soon as a salesperson approaches them to convince them to buy a product, the first thing they will do is ask their team to research the market to find out who else provides a similar product. Then they will reach out to them and see whether they can get the same product that you're offering, cheaper, faster, and at a better quality. Then, once they find your competitor who has a more affordable, better, faster, and higher quality solution, they may even consider negotiating with him to get a better price over the price that you have quoted. The world of business moves at a breakneck pace now, so you must too. You must know everything you need to know about your competitors and educate the customer about why a lower price from your competitor does not mean they have the best solution for the problem at hand.

Do not rush into meeting a decision-maker.

When a customer's problem is enormous, urgent, pressing, and the customer is bleeding money every day, a decision-maker may choose not to follow the standard procurement procedure; and will attempt to solve the problem to stop the bleeding urgently. Therefore, a quick decision may be reached after your meeting with the decision-maker without even giving you a chance to come back for a second meeting.

Therefore, I highly advise you not to rush into a meeting with the decision-maker before doing all of the above homework. The more information you gather, the better the chance you'll have in convincing the decision-maker to agree to whatever you are asking.

So, I agree that this is a lot of work, but you don't have to repeat it for every single target customer, you can do it for a specific market, sector, region, size of the company, or product type that you are selling.

Once you do the research for one company in a target sector, you do not need to repeat it. You can use the initial research for multiple opportunities. Your time, energy, and money that you have put into the research can be distributed among several opportunities.

Therefore, do the research and be patient and don't jump into the water before knowing if there are sharks in it or not.

The Analysis

The End of Discovery Meetings

What do you do after you have finished all your discovery meetings and gathered all the information, answers, and data?

At this time, your main job is to bring in your market analyst, strategic people, and your head of sales and marketing, and share with them, in a detailed presentation, all of the information and data which you have gathered about your customers, competitors, suppliers, market experts, and culture experts. Divide this presentation into three critical sections, as follows:

Section 1: What We Thought

This is where you list all of the assumptions which you have made about the market and the target customers before conducting your research. You also need to inform the audience about the methodology of how you went about validating all the assumptions. List the questions you have asked and how you have asked the questions. Tell them who did you interview and why did you interview them.

In discovery meetings interviews, sometimes you don't use a direct question. Instead, you conduct a small demo, experiment, or a test to gather data. If you have done any of these experiments, share your findings and results in this section of your presentation. Your aim of this section is to show your team that the research had a specific objective, which is validating all of the assumptions your sales and marketing materials were built on.

It will be embarrassing if the decision-maker finds out that you have built the whole pitch on unvalidated assumptions and guesses. Therefore, it was imperative to conduct this research to validate all of these assumptions before meeting the decision-maker to avoid such embarrassment.

After this explanation of what you thought before conducting the market research, the team that you're speaking to will immediately realize that it was imperative for you to conduct this research; and you not only had to spend much time doing it but you have done it very professionally and very smartly. This will make them excited about the next section of your presentation.

Section 2: What We Found

In this section of your presentation, you will highlight all the information that you have found out with relation to each assumption that you believed before going into the market. Your findings should be crystal clear and factual and not opinion-based. You should show data and facts and not emotional or nonfactual information. The reason why all of your findings have to be based on data and factual information is to leave no room for doubt, misunderstanding, or further guesses and assumptions while you're drafting the final pitch to the decision-maker.

You have to be sure that the sources of the information you are building your pitch on are factual, regardless of where this data or information comes from. Having attended many discovery meetings with some of my marketing team, I have found that many discovery meetings are utterly a waste of time. I found that most of the information the marketer gathered was nothing but opinions, guesses, and assumptions.

I must stress that it does not matter who has raised or shared their opinion or assumption with you; it is still an assumption, a guess, or an opinion. And this makes an increased chance for error, primarily if it is not based on real factual data. So, if you have spent much time conducting research, and you have not gathered enough facts; go back to the market and validate all the opinions, guesses, and assumptions again to make sure that there is no room for error in the data. Do not leave any room for misinterpretation, misunderstanding, or doubt in the decision-maker's mind.

Section 3: What We Have Changed

The data and facts you have gathered from your research will help you to eliminate all the assumptions, opinions, and guesses out of your pitch and probably to your overall market-penetration strategy. In this section of your presentation, you will share with the audience the changes and improvements you have made to your pitch.

You have to modify your pitch in a way that makes it a no-brainer for the decision-maker to agree with you. In case the decision-maker challenges any of the points you are presenting during the pitch, you refer back to the source of information and assure the decision-maker that you have left no room for any doubt about the conclusions you are making to him.

Your objective is to leave zero doubt in the decision-maker's mind that he is talking to a professional expert, who has taken the time to investigate in-depth the problem that the company is facing. And you have studied each possible option for a solution that may exist out there, and you have found that the solution you have identified perfectly fits the problem at hand. The decision-maker will see that the confidence level you're displaying during the pitch will be second to none because you are no longer guessing or assuming any of the information you are presenting.

Revising Your Target Customer List:

As a result of your research, you may need to change the criteria of the target customer list. If your criteria were built on the wrong customer type, and you have gathered data that proves that you were targeting the wrong kind of companies, this is the time to change the criteria. You may choose to remove certain target companies from the list or add others.

Please don't waste your team's time asking them to talk to everyone. Only amateur salespeople target everyone out there. Professionals focus their efforts on a few qualified customers and approach them only when these customers fit the criteria.

Revisiting Your Strategy:

Proper data-based research will positively impact your market penetration strategy. If you have initially built this strategy on lots of invalidated assumptions, now is the time to modify it using the data and facts you have gathered from your research. You will be surprised how much this research and discovery meetings will change your market approach and strategy.

Don't rush to the market after the research is completed; instead, take the time to review and make changes to your strategy with your team. This step may be the most critical in your journey of closing big deals and selling to large organizations. Please don't take it lightly.

Action Steps:

1. Compile all of your discovery meeting target list of people to meet. Prioritize them.
2. Compile all your discovery meeting questions.
3. Compile all your discovery meeting scripts.
4. Practice the full meeting script with friends, family, or colleagues.
5. Refine and modify your questions and script as needed.
6. Once you are comfortable with the script, schedule a time in your calendar to connect with your network of contacts and ask them for an introduction to the target companies' influencers.

7. Schedule the influencers meetings.

8. Practice your meeting script before each meeting.

9. After at least five meetings, you may need to refine your discovery meeting questions and scripts if you feel you are not getting lots of data and facts.

10. Once you reach the target number of discovery meetings and you have validated all your assumptions and guesses, compile your research findings, analyze them, and draw your conclusions.

11. Present the findings to your team and discuss the results.

12. Refine your strategy, target, and customer list.

13. Prepare for decision-makers meetings. (This will be covered in the next chapter.)

Preparing for the Decision-Maker Pitch:

When it comes to deciding what to say in the pitch, how to say it, the PowerPoint slides, the visual aid materials, what to do during the meeting, and what to do after the meeting; all of these essential elements of your pitch will be the topic of the next chapter.

It is showtime! Be prepared to have the best presentation and pitch that you have ever done in your life.

Let me unveil the secrets of the perfect pitch.

Step 3: The Pitch

"There is no such thing as a no-sale call. A sale is made on every call you make. Either you sell the client some stock or he sells you a reason he can't. Either way, a sale is made; the only question is who is gonna close?

You or him?"

–Jim Young (Ben Affleck), *Boiler Room*

Now that you have gathered the needed information from discovery meetings, it is critical to prepare your pitch and custom-build it for your target audience. The audience includes decision-makers and purchasing managers. Another target audience could be anyone who influences the decision-maker.

Assuming that you have already succeeded in getting an introduction to the decision-maker and a meeting has been set up for your pitch, it is imperative to know precisely how to prepare for such vital meetings by not leaving anything that could go wrong.

There are three secrets to a successful meeting; preparation, preparation, and preparation.

This chapter will cover what you should do and say before, during, and after the meeting, to ensure that you will come out of the meeting a winner.

What do you think is the objective of your pitch?

If you said to close the deal, you are mistaken. Your objective is *not* to close the deal. It is to close the POC (Proof of Concept). Only amateurs try to close a big deal from the first meeting with the decision-maker, and you are not an amateur, you are a professional.

So, don't go for the sale during the first meeting, instead, aim to get approval to allow you to conduct a free POC. If you are not sure what is a POC and how to do one successfully, don't worry, I will cover this topic in depth in the next chapter.

Here is a true story to illustrate the importance of custom building a pitch that suits the local market. A European company who made high-quality products in the healthcare sector approached our office to assist them in increasing their sales in the GCC market. They had terrific products, nicely-designed brochures, great videos, and pretty much every impressively-designed marketing tool you can think of to close a deal. The only problem they had was a product-centric PowerPoint presentation, which did not help them close a deal. The slides told a great story about the product they sell, but did not address the customer's problem and did not offer any competitive differentiator. So, it was far from being perfect and needed some work.

Despite several attempts from our marketing advisor to convince them to do market research to identify how their product is unique in comparison to their competitor; they refused to do any modification to their slides and insisted that their pitch is perfect. They also emphasized that there was no need to conduct market research since they have been operating in the UAE market for two and a half years already and claimed that they know the market needs very well.

One of my company advisors asked them: "I get that you have 16 European offices and you have been successfully selling these products all over Europe, but the UAE healthcare market is a very different market. We are in Asia, not in Europe. People here don't make their decision to change their product the same way European's do. So you have to do some discovery meetings to understand how people in the UAE make such purchase decisions, and then adjust your marketing and sales tools accordingly."

The company's head of sales responded: "Healthcare is healthcare whether you are in Dubai, Madrid, or Shanghai. We are not selling different products in every market we operate in. It is the same product, so why should we customize our pitch and our sales tools? These marketing tools have worked for us for over a decade, so why change what is not broken. What you are asking me to do is illogical. It does not make sense. Besides, we have instruction from our Head of Marketing not to change a single word in our PowerPoint slides. They have spent hundreds of hours writing and designing these slides. So, I am not going to change a single word. I am sorry."

Advisor: "Look, you came to us asking for our help to increase your sales, now you are telling me you don't want to take our advice, and you want to continue to do the same things you were doing for two and half years in the UAE. How in the world do you expect different results if you keep making the same mistakes? That's the definition of insanity, according to Einstein. Repeating the same mistakes and expecting different results."

The advisor continued: "I took one look at your slides, and I can easily see that they are not well-suited for the UAE market. You are selling the product and not focusing on differentiating it from your competitors. Maybe in Europe you don't have many competitors because you started early, and you are a leader in that sector. In the UAE, that is not the case; you are late. You came into this market many years behind your competitors. Giants are competing against you from the U.S.A., China, India, Russia, and also from Europe. The local decision-makers in the UAE have experienced and purchased the same product you are trying to sell from your competitors, so they *will* compare your product to others. Your PowerPoint does not cover how you uniquely compare to others and why the local decision-maker should try your product to see how superior it is to the current product they are using. Why is it so hard to understand my advice? What is not logical about it? Moreover, with all due respect to your Head of Marketing, he has not done his homework in the UAE before sending you to sell a product that is not ready for the market. So clearly, you are deciding without the proper marketing advice from your Head of Marketing."

Head of sales responded:" I understand what you are saying, but there is nothing I can do. We have explicit instruction not to change the slides or the pitch."

The advisor: "Then I am sorry, I will write my report to my senior management that you are refusing to take my advice, and you choose not to change your way of entering the market. And I will not be held responsible for your anticipated low sales results, if any."

Based on our advisor's report, my team decided not to continue with the partnership, and the European company continued to go around the country, pitching their product in the same old way. And you can guess how many deals they have closed. You've guessed right. Zero.

At a gala dinner, I met an old friend who manages the purchasing department of a major hospital in Abu Dhabi, who informed me that they did not buy from the European company despite hearing their pitch twice. When I asked him for the reasons, he said: "What they were asking was ridiculous. We had purchased the same product from their competitor 18 months ago, and it is working fine, and we have signed a four-year contract with their competitor. How could I possibly break a contract like that and throw away the current equipment I have purchased and replace it? Especially that they kept failing at differentiating how their product is superior to their competitors! And to top it all off, the price of their product was higher than their competitors. Just a total rubbish proposal. We said we'd call them in three years when our contract is due for renewal."

I asked: "So, are you going to call them then?"

He said: "Of course not, why would I call someone who is more expensive? If the equipment I have purchased works well over the next three years, I won't replace them. Maybe upgrade to a newer version if I can negotiate a better price. And I am sure I will get it. We purchase such equipment in huge quantities since we have more than 23 clinics in our hospitals, and all of them need this equipment."

I think the moral of the story is clear. You have to be coachable and adjust your marketing and sales tools to any foreign market to make sure your pitch fits the customer's needs. Customers are not stupid, and they don't get impressed by your big brand. If your competitors have a big name behind them, you have to find other ways to show how you stand out. Refusing to do so is an absolute suicide in business. Don't make such a mistake. Do your market research, adjust your pitch, and go on to win sales. That's the only way.

Preparing for the Meeting

I'm not going to dwell too much on getting ready for the meeting, as any professional person would know the basics of how to prepare for an important meeting; this includes coordinating with the administrative assistants to ensure the following:

- Confirmation of the time and location of the meeting (allow ample time for driving and traffic).
- How much time is allocated for the meeting.
- Whether the decision-maker has another important meeting after the time allotted to you.
- Whether he needs to leave the building to go somewhere.
- Whether he would have enough time if the session extends beyond its initial allocated time.
- Whether you can park somewhere specific that they allocate for visitors or will you need to use public parking.

The Meeting Room

It would be best if you asked the administrative assistant about all the elements that would be available in the room, such as:

- Visual aids facilities (screen, projector, TV)
- Type of cable connections to your laptop
- A flip chart and markers
- Proper lighting (Not too bright or dark)
- Sound equipment (speakers and microphones)
- Any other items that will improve and enhance any visual or audible presentation

If you are planning to conduct a demo, then you have to make sure that the environment of the room is suitable. Coordinating all of the above items with the administrative assistants in advance of your presentation is critical.

Seating preference of the decision-maker is vital in preparing your slides. The size of the font that you use in the presentation has to be visual from a far distance. Make sure the font size is larger than 32, and the font color is either dark on a light background, or bright on a dark background.

Four Personality Types

As you approach different companies, you will meet different types of decision-makers; make sure you prepare a presentation that suits the decision-maker's personality and their learning type. Doing your homework should pay off in better preparing you to custom build your pitch for the target decision-maker. Is the decision-maker a driver, expressive, analytical, or an amiable person?

Each of these personality type likes to interact with other people in their different ways. Note that there are also decision-makers who are a combination of these personality types. So, if you have done your homework by asking the influencers you met during your discovery stage, they would've informed you about the personality type of the decision-maker. Accordingly, you would have modified the pitch to fit the decision-maker's personality type.

I will not spend more time explaining how to pitch to these different personality types. There are many resources online that can show you very accurately how to do that.

Learning Style

You also have to know how the decision-maker likes to learn. Does the decision-maker learn visually, orally, or in a kinesthetic manner?

If the decision-maker is visual, you would probably want to use lots of images and pictures and show him graphs and charts which he can relate to and quickly understand.

If you were told a decision-maker is an aural person, then most likely, you are better off having a chat and a conversation-style pitch rather than using visuals or demos.

However, if you find out that the decision-maker is more kinesthetic in his learning and comprehension style, then you would want to focus more on a demo instead of a presentation. In a demo, the decision-maker would be able to see, feel, and touch your product, as these types of people learn better by interacting and touching the product, which is very different from visual and aural people.

Action Steps:

1. Make a checklist which you follow *before* each decision-maker meeting and ensure that you and your staff follow this checklist.

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2. Do you have four different presentations which target the four different personality types and the learning style of each type?

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If not, build them so you can use the appropriate one after you find out the decision-maker's personality type.

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Entering the Room

If you want to avoid unpleasant surprises that could ruin your pitch to the decision-maker, arrive at least 45 minutes before the meeting starts to set up all of your visual aids and presentation equipment.

If the designated meeting room is already occupied, then you will be faced with one of two scenarios; either you would be asked to come in the room with the decision-maker already being present with his influencers, or you may find that only the influencers are present and you are all waiting for the decision-maker to arrive.

My advice to you is to not engage in a business conversation with the influencers at this stage; rather, speak about any causal topics. This will prevent the influencers from asking you questions about your pitch, which may disrupt the information flow that you have prepared for the decision-maker.

If any of them ask you: “So, what are we gonna talk about today? Can you give me more details about it while we wait for our boss to arrive?” Politely reply that you would be happy to share all the detailed information once the decision-maker arrives so that they don't have to hear the presentation twice. You may tell them, however, about the agenda, then change the topic to discuss other casual and personal matters which are not business related.

Use this time while you're chatting with the influencers to set up your presentation and visual aid equipment. The last thing you want is for the decision-maker to walk into the room, while you still have not set up your presentation because you are busy talking with his influencers.

Remember, your objective is not to build a strong relationship or impress the influencers; instead, it is to receive a YES from the decision-maker. After this meeting, you may wish to build a good rapport with the influencers, but during the meeting, don’t get distracted from your core objective; focus on the main person: the decision-maker.

Once the decision-maker enters the room, aim to be the first person to head towards him/her and shake their hand warmly while smiling, and tell them that you been looking forward to meeting with them. Wait for the decision-maker to guide you where to sit or stand while presenting. My advice is not to go into the presentation mode immediately, instead start having brief chitchat with the decision-maker talking about personal or casual matters, which you have found out about him/her. This could be a hobby, a common interest, and a common friend, an achievement, or anything that will please them to talk about.

Your objective is to make the decision-maker connect with you and like you before even making the presentation. There are many topics to talk about, which are pleasant to all types of people. Do your homework on these topics and stay away from the debatable topics such as religion, politics, or any other sensitive issues.

Setting the Stage

Before you start your pitch, you want to make the decision-maker at ease about what you are going to present, so you would be asking him some basic questions as follows:

Question One: “Mr. Ali, may I ask, how much time do we have today?”

If he tells you a shorter period than what his assistants have allocated for you, you should not object; instead, you should state that's perfect for what you are trying to achieve, and you will even try to finish sooner than that time if possible. Pick a shorter version of your presentation and leave enough time for questions and answers, especially if the decision-maker is not a visual person who would much rather have a conversation.

Question Two: "Mr. Ali, would you prefer that we have a conversation to cover the agenda for today without using a PowerPoint presentation? Alternatively, would you prefer that I present to you using PowerPoint, and you may interrupt me and ask any questions during the presentation? Which of these two options do you prefer?"

Your objective of this question is to immediately determine whether the decision-maker is a visual person, an auditory, or a kinesthetic person who likes to hold things in his hands as he touches them and feels them while flipping through the printed slides.

If the decision-maker states that he prefers a conversation, then you may still keep the PowerPoint slides handy to refer to a specific slide with a graph or a chart, which could make your point stronger and clearer.

The objective of the above questions is to indirectly give power to the decision-maker to feel that he is in control of the meeting. The more decisions you ask him to make, the more he feels in charge of the meeting, and the more he will like you.

Action Steps:

1. Make a list of general topics to use for chitchat with the decision-maker or influencers. Update this list as current events develop. Avoid political or any controversial issues. The end of the chitchat should leave the decision-maker positive and pleased to have the chitchat, so pick your topics wisely. Come up with at least five topics which any decision-maker is likely to enjoy talking about or find out a specific topic before attending the meeting.

Chitchat Positive Topic 1:

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Chitchat Positive Topic 2:

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Chitchat Positive Topic 3:

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Chitchat Positive Topic 4:

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Chitchat Positive Topic 5:

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2. Do you have a chitchat script? If not, prepare one and write it down. Then practice it with your colleagues or staff before the meeting. You don't have to memorize the script, as long as you can remember what the points to cover are and how to cover them. The more you practice your script, the more natural you will sound during the meeting. Remember, success in such meetings depends greatly on the preparation.

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Your First Statement

The first thing you should do in this important meeting is to put the decision-maker at ease. Most decision-makers anticipate that a decision will be asked of them at the end of the session. So, most of them are not at ease as they become impatient during the presentation to find out exactly what it is that you want from them. As a professional, your job is to put the decision-maker at ease immediately at the beginning of the presentation by stating the following:

“Mr. Ali, I would like to start by saying that we are not here today to sell you anything. We are here to share with you the findings of our research, which we have conducted in the market and your organizations. We believe the insights of this research will be of great interest to you. At the end of today’s presentation, you will be given three options to choose on the way you would like to move forward based on the findings of the report. Alternatively, you may choose not to take any action today, that is also okay by us, and it would be simply nice to have met you. I will also leave you a copy of the report so that you can read and study it with your team. The report will be given to you free of charge whether you choose to work with us or not. How does that sound to you, Mr. Ali?”

With this smart introduction statement, you put the decision-maker at ease knowing that if he chooses to ignore the findings of your report, and chooses not to take any action, that is entirely acceptable by you. This translates to the comfortable conclusion that you are not going to be a pushy salesperson who is trying to shove a product down the decision-maker’s throat. Instead, you are merely there to share valuable information free of charge.

As a decision-maker myself, I love it when salespeople start with the end in mind, by stating the purpose of the meeting at the beginning before diving into the presentation. For example, I love it when people start their pitch by saying, “The purpose of this meeting is the following … and at the end of the meeting, all I want from you is the following … but if you don’t make any decision today, that is okay, and is acceptable by us, no problem at all.”

By stating that you would be sharing a report which investigated a critical issue, you build up the curiosity of the decision-maker to find out about the research you have conducted and its findings. The words and tone you will use in the introduction statement should excite the decision-maker to think, “Hmmm, I'm curious and eager to find out what this research is all about and what are the findings.” Your job is to build excitement and anticipation more than worry about whether they have to buy your product or service.

Share the Agenda:

Any good presentation should clearly state the agenda of the meeting as follows:

1. Tell them what you're going to tell them. (The Agenda)

2. Tell them. (The Details)

3. Recap and summarize what you have told them and give them options for the next steps to move forward (The Summary & Next Steps)

I also advise you to let the audience know how long each of these three sections will take so that they can anticipate how much time will be left for them to have a conversation with you and ask questions.

Action Steps:

1. Add some of the statements you have learned above to your pitch script. As you modify the script by adding more sentences, make sure the flow from one sentence to another sounds natural.

The Pitch

Have you ever wondered what is going on in the mind of a decision-maker during a sales pitch?

To answer this question, we have conducted analytical research with many decision-makers and attended hundreds of meetings with them during pitches of companies who were trying to sell something in B2B meetings.

Ten Critical Questions

We have found that 87.4% of the decision-makers were wondering some or most of the following questions during a pitch:

1. Who are you?
2. What do you do?
3. Why do you do what you do?
4. Why should I continue to listen to you? Do I have the problem that you are talking about? How big is this problem that I have? What is the problem costing me?
5. Who else says that I have this problem and that the problem is big enough, and it costs me a lot?
6. What is your solution to this big problem?
7. What are my options other than your solution?
8. What do you want from me now?
9. If I agree to what you're asking me, what are my risks versus rewards?
10. Once I make a decision today, what will happen next? When will you get back to me?

If you structure your pitch to answer all of the above 10 questions, then your chance of getting a favorable decision will be significantly increased.

Now, let us discuss how you should answer the above questions; and how much time and details you should invest in each question so that you do not waste time talking about things that do not matter much to the decision-maker.

How to answer question # 1: Who are you?

The decision-maker wants to know in one or two sentences who you are, as a company. Note that at this stage of the conversation, nobody cares much about who you are; so, don't brag. However, who you are will be vital if they decide to buy your solution. So, save the bragging for later and be as brief as possible here.

You should state the name of the company, the country you are from, and company size. It would help if you also let the decision-maker know how many customers you serve, and where you rank among your competitors who operate in the same sector.

Example:

"Our company is ABC technologies; we are a 23-year-old company, based in Belgium with offices in six other European countries, including our new office in the UAE. We are a total of 315 employees, we serve more than 67 medium to large customers around the world, including fortune 500 companies in Europe; and we rank number three as the top solution provider for this industry."

If any of the above information is not something that you are proud of sharing, replace it with something that you are proud of, and it will impress the decision-makers and influencers to know about it.

How to answer question # 2: What do you do?
Again, try to be brief; what you do should be stated in one single slide with a maximum of one to two sentences.

Example:
"We are a software development company that helps HR managers reduce churn and recruitment costs by predicting unsatisfied and unproductive employees using data collected from leave days and attendance data."

How to answer question # 3: Why do you do what you do?
Since Simon Sinek's book *"Start with Why"* was published in 2009, business advisors swear by Simon's valuable advice of communicating with customers, to always start with the reasons of doing something rather than what are you doing.

Example:
"From our research, we've found that 93.4% of the companies we've researched over the past 23 years had no clue how expensive it was for them to lose key employees. When we share the non-disputable data with our customers about the loss of profitability as a result of them losing key employees, most of them are shocked in disbelief.

We firmly believe good companies that are sincere about looking after their key employees, and who have invested a lot of time and money to nurture and grow them, should be able to predict ahead of time the possibility of losing a key employee. We aim to find these companies, help them stop these employees from leaving and increase their profits year after year. So, this is why we do what we do. We believe no good company should suffer the loss of good employees when it can be easily avoided."

All of the above should not be written on a slide, only a headline or a single sentence that describes what this sentence says. Remember, PowerPoint slides are called visual aids for a reason. Visual aids are meant to aid and assist the presenter in stating his point with clarity. A slide is not intended for you to write full sentences of text. The sentence should be summarized in a header and written in a bullet point format, which the audience should guess the idea of what you're trying to say, but not fully understand it by merely reading the headline. They should not have another choice other than listening to you to explain in detail what you mean. You should be the center of attention during a presentation, not your slides.

I'm not too fond of people who fill their slides with sentence after sentence and start reading the slides. What they don't realize is that the audience can read the written text much faster than the presenter can read. Some of the best presentations I have seen do not have text, instead only images and pictures. This makes the audience have no choice but to listen to what the presenter is saying to understand the meaning behind the picture.

How to answer question # 4: Why should I continue to listen to you?

Do I have the problem? How big is the problem? What does it cost me?

I have combined these four questions in one section because your answers to the four items should be in the same section of your presentation. Your objective here is to inform the decision-maker that his company fits the ideal type of customer who would face the problem that you are solving. Therefore, you have researched by speaking to the concerned department and gathered information to evaluate if his company has the symptoms of the problem.

Example:

"Mr. Ali, your company type is very similar to the type of companies that we service with our HR solution. A few weeks ago, we had approached your head of Human Resources and spoke to your payroll officers. We asked them detailed questions about the churn rate and the number of key employees that have left your organization in the past. Your staff shared data that clearly showed that the company had lost more than US$21.6 million in the past 10 years as a result of losing key personnel. The data shared with us also showed that you are at risk of losing 16% of your current key personnel in the next 2 to 5 years, purely based on their attendance and annual leave data, which demonstrates alarming signs of a high-risk turnover of these key employees. If this 16 % of employees leave the company in the next 2 to 5 years, a further loss of $5.7 million will be taken off your profit line in the next few years."

The above example gives the decision-maker specific and detailed figures, which shows that thorough research has been conducted with the right people in his company. It also demonstrates that you have performed a detailed analysis based on the data that you have collected. The above example also shows the risks associated with choosing not to solve it, and the consequences of the cost of an activity. The above example does not leave any room to doubt whether you have your presentation built on assumptions or guesses. Instead, it shows that careful analysis has been conducted by professionals who know what they're doing.

It is highly unlikely that the decision-maker will question your figures; especially after you've mentioned that you have more than 23 years' experience in the industry, have helped more than 67 companies across the globe (some being Fortune 500), and you have gathered all of the figures from a very credible source, which is the company's HR department. How could the decision-maker possibly doubt that source?

Can you imagine if you have completely ignored the research phase, which we have talked about in the previous section of this book? Or if you walked into the decision-maker's office and just stated that you are a software company that solves HR and attendance issues and reduces churn of critical employees? Do you think your statement or your pitch will be as strong as the previous one, which had all the data and was based on real in-depth research? Probably not.

How to answer question # 5: Who else talks about this problem and its severity?

When it comes to stating the severity of a problem, it is best not to exaggerate it. Make sure you share opinions of industry experts who are talking about the impact and the severity of the same problem in the sector which the target company is operating in. It would be best if you also mentioned credible publications and articles that speak about the danger and the severity of the problem and the costs of leaving the problem unsolved.

Decision-makers are used to salespeople exaggerating the impact of a small problem to sell a product. The more third-party references you share with the decision-maker, specifically industry experts, which the decision-maker highly respects, the more likely the decision-maker would be convinced that the problem should not be left unsolved.

How to answer question # 6: What is your solution to this problem?

In this section of the presentation, your objective is to state that other companies who had the same problem were able to solve the problem in a short period using your solution.

Example:

“Mr. Ali, let me confidently tell you that the fastest and best way to solve this problem is by using our HR software, which once it is fed the data from your HR department. By analyzing the attendance and the annual leave of your key employees, it will swiftly identify the key people in your organization that are at risk of leaving.

The software will then suggest methods on how to recognize some of the challenges these key employees are facing in the company. Our professional HR consultants will then work with your HR directors to implement remedies to the core causes of the problem.

There is a 3- to 6-month plan, which our qualified team can share with your HR directors to identify the core causes of losing key employees. They will also work closely with your HR unit to make sure to produce positive results in reducing the turnover of these key employees.

How to answer question # 7: What are my other options to solve this problem other than your solution?

Your objective is to lay down additional options for the decision-maker to consider other than your proposed solution. You have to do this for the decision-maker to feel that you are not trying to show that your option is the only one to solve the problem.

These options should be realistic; they should be possible courses of action which the decision-maker could consider as an alternative to your solution, such as:

<u>Option 1:</u> A resolution from a direct competitor who claims to do something similar to what your product does.

Your objective is to inform the decision-maker that the market does have competitors, but you should highlight the limitations of their offerings. Your previously-conducted market research and your competitive analysis should pay off here; by informing the decision-maker that you have personally investigated and analyzed all other competitive solutions, and you have studied their offerings including price, payment terms, delivery, and other related matters. This initiative gives comfort to the decision-maker that the competitive analysis has already been done, and there is no need to instruct his staff to repeat it.

<u>Option 2:</u> A solution from an indirect competitor who solves part of the problem:

Your objective here is to merely state partial solutions which the decision-maker could consider which clearly will not address the whole issue or may not give the results which the decision-maker would be seeking if he chooses this route. Again, your previously-conducted market research of talking to indirect competitors should pay off here.

<u>Option 3:</u> Postponing solving the problem until a later time.

Your objective in this option is to give a choice to the decision-maker to consider ignoring the problem for at least another, three, or six months before considering doing something about it. The decision-maker has to see the growing cost of not solving this problem as time passes.

Your clear message to the decision-maker is that he may choose not to take immediate action, but his choice of inactivity will have severe consequences. So, even if the decision-maker is convinced that immediate action is not required, and the problem can be kicked down the road, he could be questioned by the other stakeholders, especially if the delay in solving the problem is not fully justified.

<u>Option 4:</u> Completely ignoring the problem and not solving it at all.

As most decision-makers' objectives are to reduce losses, increase revenue, and grow their company; they will not allow a problem that is costing them serious money to continue without finding a solution.

Your carefully calculated cost-of-inactivity and your previous research findings should eliminate this option for the decision-maker. Give him no reason to doubt the integrity of your report;

especially if the influencers in the room were part of the research that you have conducted, who can verify and confirm the accuracy of your findings.

How to answer question # 8: What do you want from me now?

In the first meeting with the decision-maker, the decision-maker does not know you well or trust you; he may have some doubts and reservations which he does not want to reveal to you. So, it would be best if you aimed to give him the comfort of making a low-risk decision while he takes his time to verify the information and data which you have shared with him and study it with his influencers.

Therefore, you should suggest to the decision-maker to take a baby step towards finding a solution to the problem. This initial step is accepting to conduct a POC, which shall eliminate any doubt about your solution's effectiveness in solving the issue at hand. Your aim of the POC is to demonstrate that your solution is the least-risky option considering the severity of the problem.

Once you ask the decision-maker to accept conducting a POC, be prepared if the decision-maker asks you about the approximate cost and price of your proposed solution, in an attempt to evaluate whether your solution is worth investigating or conducting a POC.

If your solution price is high and the decision-maker does not have the budget, the likely decision that the decision-maker would make is not agreeing to conduct the free POC. This is not an outcome that you want; therefore, you should avoid giving a price at this early stage. Tell the decision-maker not to worry himself about the affordability of the solution; instead, convince him to focus on evaluating whether your solution can solve the problem and whether it is the most practical solution in comparison to other options.

Convince the decision-maker that in case your solution does not fix the problem effectively, then the price is entirely irrelevant.

The best way to answer this price request is to inform the decision-maker that your pricing depends on many factors and variables that are currently unavailable to you and that it is challenging for you to come up with a price if you lack all of this data and variables.

Example:

"Mr. Ali, I would love to give you a price right now and close a deal immediately; however, I would be doing you an injustice if I did so without first eliminating all the benefits and features that you may not need. The elimination of the not-requires benefits and features may reduce the price significantly.

So, for me to give you an accurate price, we have to do two things: First, to evaluate whether the software that we have is the best solution for your company and whether it can be implemented in your organizations to solve this problem. Second, we will need to find essential historical data to make the software function effectively. The data will also help us decide on the needed features. We can gather this vital information by spending three days with your staff and looking at the data that they have and the number of users that would need to access the system. Based on all of that information, we would be able to get you started at the lowest possible price.

Mr. Ali, my objective is not to sell you things that you don't need and lose your trust in my company and me; on the contrary, I aim to earn your trust and to start a positive relationship with you. I am confident that once we start doing business on a small scale, we will continue to grow to do business on a larger size. What is more critical for me now is to demonstrate that we can add value to your company and that our software is the best fit for the problem.

I am happy to do whatever you wish. I can give you an inaccurate high price now, which could turn you off if it is too high and you will be paying for features that you may not need, or we can conduct a free POC and gather the necessary data and test the software before you even consider buying it. We can always discuss price and features at a later stage, and you can decide then if you wish to invest. Which of these two options would you prefer, sir?"

How to answer question # 9: If I agree to what you're asking me, what are my risks versus rewards?

Your objective here is to state any risks that the decision-maker will be taking and explain that there is nothing for him to worry about because there is no financial commitment involved at this time.

Sometimes, decision-makers are not just concerned about the financial risk of a decision, but more worried about the time commitment and allocation of human resources; especially if the people that you're asking to be involved in the POC are very involved and committed to other projects. Your objective is not to leave decision-makers wondering about how to solve this dilemma; instead, you have to be prepared to offer multiple options to address any concerns that may arise out of your discussion in this meeting.

In case the decision-maker asks you to give him time to think about the availability of resources needed for the POC, you should grant them their wish by agreeing to call them back in a couple of days and to find out who would be working with your team on the POC. Even though I am not a big advocate of allowing decision-makers to delay decisions with the excuse of "thinking about it," sometimes, decision-makers need to take a few steps back to consult with their people before committing. So, try not to be pushy, but make sure that you get a commitment before leaving the meeting.

If you feel that the decision-maker is asking for more time to do something that doesn't require him to take the time to do it, then you should not allow the decision-maker to easily escape making a decision on the spot and moving forward. Use the following example in responding to such an objection.

Example:

"Mr. Ali, I understand that you need to think about it; but can I ask you a question? How do you feel about the product? How do you feel about the solution? How do you feel about what I shared with you as a report? How do you feel about this ...? and how do you feel about that?"

Once the decision-maker answers any of your above questions by telling you that he feels good about the product, the solution, the report, or whatever you have asked about, you reply with the following:

"Exactly, it is a great product, and I am glad you like it; as a matter of fact, many of our existing customers have told us that after they have purchased it, they were extremely happy not end the problem they were having ...." You simply continue selling the importance of fixing the problem quickly and not delaying the decision by doing the POC as soon as possible. You don't have to accept their lame objection of, "Let me think about it," head-on. Most decision-makers who use such an objection don't actually think about it, and they will probably forget about the whole issue and get busy with other matters and never come back to you.

Trust me; I am a CEO and a decision-maker myself. Every time I was not convinced of saying "Yes" to a proposal, I use the excuse of "let me think about it" to delay the decision or brush-off the person pitching. It is merely a delay tactic. Nothing more.

Let me explain why I am advising you to ask a question when you hear an objection such as this one. This is simply a closing technique on how to handle sales objections raised by customers, which I train my sales team to use in handling such an objection. The way the technique works is as follows:

Whenever a decision-maker objects, the salesperson puts the objection aside and asks an unrelated question to the objection raised. This creates an unexpected interruption to the thoughts of the decision-maker, and it takes his focus away from the objection he just raised, and refocuses him on the product, the solution, and the report.

Your other objective is to get to the core issue that is making him hesitate. For that reason, you are asking him how he feels about the product, the solution, the report, ...etc. You are trying to find which part of these things he is not sure about and help him reveal to you what the deeper reason is for him to hesitate.

Not every objection raised by the decision-maker should be answered directly and on the spot. As a professional advisor and a solution-provider, your job is to educate the decision-maker and help him make a more refined and educated decision rather than an emotional and irrational decision to brush you off. If the decision-maker wants to delay a decision without any justification, your job is to help them not do that for their benefit, and you can use the above objection handling technique to do that.

I have written many articles and papers on how to handle objections, which is not the core topic of the book here. However, I wanted to briefly emphasize the importance of not accepting a "No" answer to your request for conducting the POC. If you practice how to handle objections effectively, you can easily convince the decision-maker to accept doing the POC.

How to answer question # 9: Once I make a decision today, what will happen next? When will you get back to me?

Once the decision-maker gives you the decision to go ahead and conduct the POC, you must explain what are the next steps and set the POC completion date.

Example:

"Mr. Ali, I want to thank you for that decision. I will get back to you with the findings of our POC in the next seven days; by then, you will be able to decide on which way you want to move forward based on the findings of our research and whether you choose to use our solution or not, either way, it is fine with us."

How to answer question # 10: End of Meeting Sign:

At this stage, if the decision-maker has made the decision you desire, you should inform the decision-maker that you have completed your presentation. Thank him for his time, restate the commitment he made, and confirm the next meeting date and time to finalize things and move forward.

Example:

"So, Mr. Ali, this brings us to the end of our presentation. If you will allow me to summarize what we have discussed:

- We have shared our preliminary research findings.

- The problems and challenges your company is facing.

- The cost of these challenges to your organizations.

- The recommended solution that we have for you.

- The options that you can consider in our solution.

- We've also discussed other solutions and other possible actions.

- We’ve also agreed that you would like to go ahead and do the POC, where you will dedicate three people from your HR department to work with us on the POC. Mr. John Smith, the head of HR, Miss Alina Davidson, the payroll officer, and Mr. Alex Edwards, who is the director of operations.
- We've committed that we will finish the POC within seven days.
- After the POC is completed, we will coordinate with your assistants to set up an appointment with you for 30 minutes, where we share with you the findings of our POC.
- We’ve also agreed that if our solution demonstrates that it can undoubtedly solve the problem, we will come back with an affordable proposal of the solution, which you may study and decide if you wish to move forward with a purchase.

And with that summary, we come to the end of our meeting, thank you very much for your time, your patience, your excellent observations, and fine comments, and I hope we get to meet again in seven days with some good news for you. Is there anything else that I have missed which you would like to discuss with us, Mr. Ali?”

If the decision-maker answers with a no, then you should stand up and extend your hands and shake the decision-maker’s hand, indicating the end of the meeting.

And that's how you do a perfect pitch to the decision-maker to persuade him to accept to conduct a POC.

Action Steps:

1. Add to your script “Who you are?”

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2. Add to your script, “What do you do?”

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3. Add to the script your version of, “Why do you do what you do?”

4. Add to the script your version of “Why should I continue to listen to you? Do I have the problem? How big is the problem? What does it cost me?”

5. Add to your script “Who else talks about this problem and its severity?”

6. Add to your script “What is your solution to this problem?”

7. Add to the script the options a decision-maker could consider in solving the problem excluding your solution.

8. Add to the script your version of “What do you want from me now?”

9. Prepare an objection handling script which answers the decision-maker’s question of “What is the price for your proposed solution?”

10. Add to the script your version of “What are my risks versus rewards?”

11. Prepare an objection handling script which answers the decision-maker’s objection of “Let me think about it.”

12. Add to the script your version of "What will happen next? When will you get back to me?"

13. Add to the script your version of the ending statement.

The Second Meeting with the DM

The second time you would meet the decision-maker is probably after your team completes the Proof of Concept (POC).

Two things that could happen after the POC has ended, either the POC was successful or not. Even if the POC did not succeed, that does not mean the end of the relationship, that could be the start of a completely new relationship which I will explain later.

Let's explore the first case, a successful POC:

If your POC is successful, the next step is to go back to the decision-maker and report the findings and ask the decision-maker for the approval to implement your solution.

It is vital while conducting the POC, to identify the supporting champions and influencers who can vouch for all the elements of your successful POC. You want these champions to support you during your final pitch to the decision-maker, so make sure that you invite these champions to the final pitch meeting.

You will follow the same rules of greeting, casual chitchat, agenda sharing, and setting the scene before presenting your POC report to the decision-maker.

Reporting the POC's Findings

Your main objective during this meeting is to offer the decision-maker two or three solution implementation options to select from. You have to make him feel that he has the final say. Most decision-makers want to have the final say in any decision, so make sure you give them that privilege at every interaction and meeting you have with him.

It would be best if you started the report presentation by stating the POC's success criteria, which have been agreed upon with the client's POC team. Briefly state the following:

- How you went about conducting the pilot?

- How long the pilot took?

- Who was involved in verifying the success criteria?

- Who has undertaken and signed off on the final acceptance test?

- The team's critical observations.

- Modifications that you would make to the final product.

- Any discoveries or other essential findings that you think the decision-maker should be aware of.

The Implementation Options:

Before laying out the implementation options, you want to remind the decision-maker of the commitment he gave you on the first meeting you had with him, where he has committed that if the POC is successful, he makes a decision based on the results of the POC. This reminder is important because it will ensure that you put him into the mindset of making a decision and honoring his commitment and not stalling moving forward. Your job during this presentation is to assist the decision-maker in studying the options and selecting the best one with the least risk and the highest rewards.

Once he acknowledges his commitment to you, you may then lay the options as follows:

Option 1: Implement the full solution in all departments.

If the problem you are solving impacts several departments within the company, the first option the decision-maker can make is to implement the solution in all departments at once. This will ensure that all stakeholders and all the departments get the full benefit and either reduce the loss of time, energy, or money. On the other hand, if the benefit of the solution generates more revenue for the company in all departments, then you should convince the decision-maker not to do the partial implementation.

However, if your resources are not sufficient to implement the full solution for all the departments, you should not offer such an option unless you are confident that by the time the first payment is made you would be able to pull off gathering all the needed resources.

Option 2: Partial implementation.

You may choose to offer the decision-maker a partial implementation if you feel that the decision-maker would not be comfortable committing to a full implementation due to a budget allocation restriction, or for any other reason.

Remember, your objective is not to try to sell the most significant deal with the maximum benefit to you at the risk of losing the trust of your customer. If the decision-maker feels at any point that you are trying to sell him a lot more than what he needs, he will not trust anything you recommend going forward.

Most decision-makers try to seek the advice of the salesperson who's offering them options while explaining the pros and cons of each option. However, if they feel the salesperson does not have their best interest at hand, they will not choose any option or may not want to make a decision and maintain the status quo. Remember the last time you went to a restaurant and asked the waiter for his recommendation about a dish that you should try, and he recommended the most expensive meal on the menu? Your instinct immediately kicked in, which gave you the feeling of mistrust of the waiter. You then went on to choose a different dish that was cheaper than the waiters recommended meal. He did not learn the art of gaining customers' trust, and obviously, he was not appropriately trained on how to serve customers professionally.

A good salesperson will always give his customers at least three options:

1- A highly-priced option with all the bells and whistles offered by the product, many of which will never be used by the customer.

2- A low-priced option that has minimal bells and whistles which makes the product not very effective in delivering the results expected;

3- A medium option that is medially-priced with the specific benefits and functionality that are needed to get the job done correctly to achieve the desired results.

A professional salesperson should always advise his customers not to go for the most expensive option and not to go for the least expensive one; instead, choose the medium option. By doing that, the customer will feel that the salesperson has the customer's best interest at hand and not trying to sell or push the most expensive product.

If it serves your decision-maker well, you may advise him to select the partial implementation and plan the implementation in several stages rather than doing it all at once. If the decision-maker is comfortable with you, has the exact budget, then he can go ahead with full implementation instead of a partial one. If this happens, then you have achieved two wins, you won the customer's confidence and trust, and you have won a bigger deal with a high price. For this reason, I advise you always to offer the medium option and let the customer and decision-maker himself decide to go for the most expensive product if needed.

Option 3: Delay solution implementation or do nothing.

The last option you would give the decision-maker is to delay or avoid making a decision to implement the solution. There are two reasons why you would offer him such an option:

Reason 1: You need at least three options in any offer, which scientifically has been proven that more than 87% of people will pick one of the three.

Reason 2: Offering the option of "doing nothing" psychologically reduces the chance of him opting for it on his own.

However, you must explain to him why this option may not be the best one among the three by reminding him of the expensive accumulated cost-of-inactivity which the problem is causing his company, and how delaying the decision will increase this cost day by day.

Most decision-makers will not go through the hassle of allowing you to do a POC and invest time and allocate valuable resources if he felt that the problem was not big enough, and the consequences of not solving this problem are not severe. By the time you have completed a successful POC, most likely the decision-maker already has made up his mind that the situation cannot continue as is, and a decision to rectify the problem must be made immediately. So, the chance that a decision-maker deciding to do nothing after a successful POC is highly unlikely.

Let me give you an example of the above to show why giving three options to any decision-maker makes total sense:

Imagine it is your son's birthday, and you have just missed your scheduled flight returning home from a business trip. You are now at the airport in a foreign country, and it's almost midnight, so you decide to approach the ticketing counter of another airline to purchase a ticket on the next flight home. You are delighted when you learn that there is a flight departing to your home city in 90 minutes, so you ask the sales agent for an economy ticket. Unfortunately, he informs you that the economy class is full. As a smart sales agent, he gives you three options to choose from as follows:

Option 1: You get on the next flight purchasing a first-class ticket.

Option 2: You get on the next flight purchasing a business class ticket.

Option 3: He offers you to take the next flight, which has a seat in the economy class. However, that flight isn't scheduled to take off for another eight hours.

So, in summary, your options are either to pay for an expensive first-class ticket, a medium-priced business class ticket, or a cheap economy traveling after eight hours.

The agent knows very well that the thought of you getting stuck at a foreign airport for eight hours is going to be extremely uncomfortable. Also, judging by the expensive watch you're wearing, he knows that you will very likely go for the business class ticket, so he makes the following statements:

"Mr. Smith, I'm sorry to inform you that the economy class seat for this flight is not available, and the next available economy seat is on a flight departing in eight hours. I'm not sure whether that next flight is going to be on time or delayed, but it usually is delayed. So, you have three options here; either you wait for eight hours or longer at this airport, which is something I don't advise you to do because of the limited number of seats at this tiny airport. The second option is to buy the business-class ticket, and I could see what kind of deal I can offer you, so you don't pay a lot. Or you may choose to be very comfortable and travel first class, which I probably would not advise since I will not be able to give you an excellent offer for the first-class ticket. And, honestly speaking, the flight is only three hours, and it may not be worth it for you to spend that kind of money on such a short flight. So, which of these three options do you prefer Mr. Smith? If you want my recommendation, I would go for the business class ticket, and I'll make sure to give you a good rate; but in the end, it's your decision, sir."

I believe you get the idea of the three options concept.

Action Steps:

1. Do you have a presentation which covers the findings of the POC? Prepare one and practice delivering it with your staff.

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2. Do you have three options which the decision-makers can select from? If not, prepare these options and add them to your final presentation and script.

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Handling Objections

The decision-maker could very well consider your three options, yet still not choose any of them, solely because he may still have some doubts, concerns, worries, or misperceptions which he wants to resolve before making a decision. Your job is not to dismiss or belittle these objections; instead, it is to act as a trusted advisor to the decision-maker and resolve any doubts, concerns, or misconceptions the decision-maker may have.

You are a problem-solver, not a sleazy salesman trying to handle objections by using cheap sales tactics that emotionally manipulate the customer to do things that he should not do. You, as a professional salesman, should listen to the objection of the decision-maker, acknowledge the objection, reinstate your understanding of the objection, and offer good potential solutions for the objections. Then allow the decision-maker to choose one of the options which could resolve the objection.

For example, if the objection is a budget limitation or lack of budget allocation, which prevents the decision-maker from committing to doing a full implementation, the way you would handle that objection is as follows:

"Mr. Ali, let me confirm my understanding of the point that you've just raised. You are saying that because you have just finalized your budget for the year, therefore, you would have no choice but to delay solving this problem until next year's budget, is that correct?

If the decision-maker confirms that your understanding is correct, you should proceed by stating the following:

"I understand your point of view Mr. Ali; you are not alone in raising this concern, it is very common that when we first share the price with many of our current customers, they had a similar budget allocation issue. However, after a quick calculation of the cost of the problem, they have realized that delaying solving the problem would cost them daily $7,000 to $9,000, and they've estimated that delaying such a critical decision will ultimately increase their losses by $2.6 million to $3.3 million for the next 12 months. They've also realized that they had no choice but to go back to the finance department and find money that was allocated to other projects with less severity and use that allocation for solving this problem to stop the daily bleeding.

My finance department team specializes in budget allocation, and they help our clients find less-priority budget allocations and reassign them for higher priority projects. So, let me recommend one of the following options:

Option One: I ask our finance department team to spend some time with your finance guys and review all the budget allocations for this year. They can find a low-priority project and use its budget for this project instead. By doing this, you will be able to stop the bleeding as soon as possible.

Option Two: We do a partial implementation, which will only require half of the budget. Our finance team can work with your team to find such a small amount. After the partial implementation is completed, you can assess for yourself whether a full implementation is required or not.

Option Three: You don't do any of the above two options and continue to allow the problem to occur until the next 12 months, which may result in the losses of $2.6 million to $3.3 million, which is not what you wish to allow to happen.

My advice to you Mr. Ali is that at least study options one and two by allowing both of out finance departments to speak to each other and come up with a budget. Let us see how much they can get. After they complete their study, you can decide what to do next. How does that sound to you?”

More Objections:

This book will do injustice by touching just the surface of the fine art of handling objections. There are specific books on the topic that can help you master this skill. I propose that you spend serious time to study and practice how to effectively handle objections and strengthen your muscle. You cannot afford to go into sales and closing meetings with a weak muscle for the art of objection-handling and closing. You could spend weeks and months pitching to the decision-maker only to reach this critical stage and end up messing it up by not knowing how to answer objections effectively and correctly.

So, let me give you my ultimate advice in handling objections: Do not use techniques to defer an objection and avoid answering it. Do not apply pressure tactics on your customers to close a deal. This is the ultimate sales suicide method still followed by many salespeople, which may have worked 20 years ago when people where less-experienced in handling salespeople and sales pitches. Nowadays, most decision-makers are very much familiar with these sales tactics and the way salespeople try to avoid answering objections and try to defer them.

Do not underestimate the intelligence and the business savviness of today’s decision-maker, especially in large companies. Don't think that you can outsmart them by using old manipulative sales tactics that no longer work. You can’t risk a big deal with a large organization using cheap sales tactics. If you want to succeed in closing big deals to large organizations, you have to continue to build trust with your clients and maintain it throughout the deal. You have to answer their objections and help them make an informed decision based on their best interests, not yours. Trust me;

this is the only way to build lasting business relationships with your large companies' decision-makers. Be honest and help them with their problems.

Action Steps:

1. Prepare a list of all the possible objections which you expect to be faced with.

2. Then, prepare a script on how to handle each objection with an answer that should increase the decision-maker's confidence in you, your solution, and your company's capability to deliver your solution.

3. Then practice the script with your staff.

An Unanticipated Option

It is common in large organizations that despite your successful implementation of the POC, their governance procedures do not allow them to directly award such vital projects without having a tender that goes through their procurement department. If you reach such a situation after you have done your POC, you should not try to influence and persuade the decision-maker to not follow their governance procedures; instead, you should respect, acknowledge, and corporate with the decision-maker and his influencers to follow whatever purchasing processes they may have.

You should not only acknowledge and accept their purchasing process but to also assist in improving it by using your team to support the purchasing department in completing the process in the fastest and most effective way possible. You do this by first understanding their procurement process, then assist every person involved to make sure that their job is more manageable. It would be best if you educated them on what is the right way to go about assessing the problem, the solution options, the benefits and features of each solution, and how to properly evaluate the offers coming from different solution providers and vendors. All of this while highlighting your independent and unbiased opinion about other people's solutions in comparison to yours.

I have worked with professional solution providers that have voluntarily sent out unbiased specifications and requirements needed for the tender. It made the life of the procurement department employees easier so that they didn't have to crack their heads trying to find out what essential requirements and specifications should be included in the tender document. Your customer should see you as not only a solution provider but as an expert in this domain, who will not spare any effort in assisting them to effectively solve the problem at hand by selecting the least-risky option with the best potential outcome.

At all times of interacting with the target customer, you should not be perceived as a salesperson trying to sell the product to them; instead, you are an advisor and industry expert whose primary objective is to support and assist the company to do what is best for the company at all times.

Always remember that as an advisor, your objective is not to try always to sell a product to your customers; instead, you should build a real long-term relationship, even if customers don't buy from you instantly. If they see you as an honest advisor, they will always come back to you for advice. And one day, when you least expect it, they will surprise you by awarding you a project directly without following the tendering process, simply out of appreciation for everything that you have done for them without expecting an immediate return.

A Favorable Decision:

If you have done everything right during your final pitch, the decision-maker will most likely have a favorable decision, which is in your benefit and agrees to do either a partial or full implementation of your proposed solution. Your job at this stage is to guide the decision-maker on the next steps. Pull out of your bag a written proposal for either a partial or full implementation. Then, you may ask the decision-maker to request his staff to study the proposal and ask questions or give their comments. Alternatively, you may ask him to sign the acceptance of the proposal if you have already agreed on the terms and the conditions with his team.

However, if the acceptance of the proposal is not given on the spot, then the decision-maker will ask his team to study your proposal. Hopefully, this team will be the influencers who were involved in the POC, and they are already sold on your solution. This is one of the most significant advantages of doing a POC; your closing becomes much easier, since you already know the influencers involved in the decision-making process. Before leaving the meeting to study the proposal with the influencers, you should get a commitment from the decision-maker that if the process gets stuck or delayed, you would want the decision-maker to get involved and expedite the decision. This is a necessary and critical request so that the two teams don't get stuck in minor details which may result in delaying solving the problem that is causing the company to bleed.

I have seen people try to save a few thousand dollars of the proposed solution price while losing tens of thousands as a result of their delay in making the decision. So, the famous saying applies to them: "penny wise, pound foolish."

Before leaving the meeting room, it is imperative to get a commitment from the decision-maker on how long he expects the two teams to study the proposal before reaching a final recommendation.

If the decision-maker agrees that the problem cannot continue being unresolved for a very long time, and he commits to deciding on a specific date, then you have achieved a great result where you left the decision-maker no choice but to make a final decision on the committed date. So, if his team drags the process of studying your proposal, you can remind them of the committed date made by their boss. They surely don't want to upset him by missing that date.

An Unsuccessful POC

In case your POC was unsuccessful, you should not skip meeting the decision-maker; instead, this is your opportunity to build an excellent advisory relationship with the decision-maker by reporting to him the findings. Explain the reasons the POC was unsuccessful, and assist him in finding an alternative solution to his problem other than your solution.

Do not blame any delays or mistakes made by the customers' team, which resulted in an unsuccessful pilot. This is not your chance to play the blame game; it is your responsibility not to allow your POC to fail. If the failure was caused by reasons you have no control over, you should have escalated such issues to the senior management to resolve. In other words, a POC should not fail due to a lack of commitment or seriousness from the customer's team; it could fail as a result of your product not being able to solve the problem. Or it may fail if the product is not designed to solve such problems based on the requirements and specifications of the company.

Next Steps After an Unsuccessful POC:

As an excellent advisor to the decision-maker, your job when your POC fails is to recommend two or three options for the decision-maker to choose from as follows:

Option One: Seek alternative solutions.

It would be best if you came to the meeting prepared with a list of alternative suppliers who can solve the problem effectively, based on the requirements and specifications of the company which you have learned about during the POC. Many times, we believe that our product perfectly fits the needs of our customers, which is not always the case. Sometimes we realize that the customer's requirements are so rigid, inflexible, and specific that our product may not be built to meet those requirements. Alternatively, the company may not be interested in investing and modifying the product to meet the needs of the proposed solution. For those reasons, a competitor may have a more suitable product for the requirements of the company where their product fits perfectly.

You also have to share the feedback of other customers reviews on different competitors' products with the decision-makers. The more information you share about your competitors, the more the decision-maker will respect you and look at you as a real advisor and not someone who is trying to sell their product and belittle or badmouth his competitors.

Like a good doctor who accepts his own limited experience in a medical case, and he may feel another doctor is more suitable for the job. So, he calls the other doctor or sends him a full medical report about the patient's case, even though this referral may end up in a loss of revenue for the doctor or the hospital that he works at.

This attitude of referring your target customer to a competitor will not only earn the respect of your customer but also earns the respect of your competitors. You never know, in the future, the competitor may refer a customer to you who has a requirement which your product is better-fitted for.

Option 2: Conduct another POC.

In case you found out that the POC has failed as a result of selecting their wrong specification, or department, or team, then you may wish to ask the decision-maker to allow you to conduct another POC. But this time by working with a different team with the correct specification and requirements. Be sure to have clear reasons why this was not requested before the first POC started. If you fail to explain the reasons for accepting to conduct the initial POC, knowing well that it is the wrong specifications, or team, or department, you may risk being perceived as an incompetent solution-provider or advisor. So, you better have some good reasons to request a second POC.

If you wish for a second POC to be granted, make sure you get a second "next meeting date" commitment from the decision-maker to report the findings of the second POC.

Moving Forward:

Now that you know how to do the perfect pitch to the decision-maker and how also to report back to him the results of the POC, you may be wondering how you go about executing the perfect POC. The next chapter will cover this topic in depth, so you can learn what are the *dos* and *don'ts* in conducting a POC in a large organization. We will also cover how to deliver a remarkable product if your customer ends up buying from you.

Step 4: The POC

"Strong Words cannot be strong evidence"

–Vasily Klyuchevsky

I have shared with you a lot of content in the previous chapter, so let's recap how you should leave the meeting. Your pitch meeting should end with the decision-maker agreeing to your action plan as follows:

1. Conduct a POC to prove that the problem exists, it is worth solving, and it can be solved by implementing your solution.
2. If you demonstrate in the POC that you can fix the problem, the decision-maker agrees to buy your solution.
3. If you fail to exhibit in the POC that your solution is the best fix for the problem, you will help the decision-maker find someone else who can fix it better than you.
4. If the decision-maker wishes to do a tender, you will assist him with the requirements of the bid so that he can find the best solution-provider much faster.

As obvious as the above action plan sounds, many salespeople do not end the pitch meeting with this simple action plan. Instead, they go on and on talking about why their product is so great, why their company is terrific, and why the decision-maker should buy their product. That's a mistake.

You always want to make sure that your meeting ends with a low-risk decision for the decision-maker, especially when he does not know you or your company well; therefore, a POC is a much safer decision to make on a first meeting.

An Indian media company, who ranked 7th top media company in India for that year, decided to enter the UAE market betting on its excellent reputation and on the number of Indian nationals who live in Dubai. Their strategy was simple. Provide media services to any company in Dubai who targets Indian nationals.

We warned them that if they are serious about taking market share in such a competitive sector, they either have to specialize in providing new and creative products, or offer some free services and prove their concepts to a few large clients. Otherwise, they can forget about trying to compete with media giants who are already leading the Dubai media market.

The company's Regional Director told me with a tone of arrogance: "Mr. Hisham, we have been in the media sector for the past 23 years, and we are currently operating in 7 markets out of India, we don't need to be lectured on foreign market entry strategies. This is our game. All we want from your team is to get us meetings with 10 organizations. Just get us the meetings. We never offered anyone free services, and we are not planning to start now."

I replied: "You have operated in 7 other markets which have very different characteristics than Dubai. What you consider high-quality work in these 7 markets, will be considered average or even below average in Dubai. The standard of quality is much higher in Dubai. So, please don't underestimate the need to offer a very high-quality unique product, which the market has not seen before, or initially offer free services to win some accounts."

Regional Director: "Mr. Hisham, with all due respect, you have not run media agencies for two decades, we have. Please just get us the meetings with the decision-makers. We'll take care of the rest. Please."

I replied: “Okay, suit yourself. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you. You may have experience in media for 23 years, but we have experience in the UAE market for over 30 years, and it’s not an easy market. Dubai is a very lucrative market, but not easy. And I think your CEO decided to partner with us for a good reason, and that is to benefit from our local market experience. But if you are telling me that you don’t want to offer any unique products or free services to win some accounts, then I will have to wait and see. Just don’t blame my team later if you end up getting no business in Dubai after a few months of meeting decision-makers. We will open the door; from there, it is your job to close the deal. So, good luck.”

I then looked at my Business Development Team and instructed them to arrange for the meetings with the clients.

Forty-six days passed since that conversation, after my team setup 14 pitching meetings for them with decision-makers in Dubai, we started to get concerned that not a single deal was signed by the Indian media giant. When my team had a private conversation with the decision-makers to find out the reason of them not buying; the decision-makers admitted that this media giant had nothing new to offer. They could be big in their country, but they are a new kid on the block in Dubai. All of these 14 clients already had media agencies, who were servicing them well, and the clients were happy with them, and these local agencies are offering the same services the Indian media company is offer if not better. So, not only is there nothing unique or different, there is no reason for the decision-makers to take a risk on working with the new kid on the block and upsetting their current media agency.

“So unless they are willing to provide us some free POCs so we can see what they can offer and test their creativity, I am not going to risk it. And we are quite happy with our media agency, so why change?" That's was the common reply my staff heard from these 14 decision-makers.

Two months and 19 pitch meetings later, and not one sale. I asked my team to terminate our cooperation agreement to save our reputation in the market. The Indian media agency decided to continue to try to sell in Dubai without us. So they continued meeting clients for 9 months before closing their offices and going back to Indian with zero sales.

They refused to adapt our market entry strategy, and they paid a hefty price for their stubbornness. They lost hundreds of thousands of dollars of setup and operational cost.

The lesson here is that if you are entering a competitive market, you have to be willing to initially invest and do free POCs or offer some free services to allow clients to try your quality of work. Refusing to do that and betting on your brand strength and reputation is a mistake. Don't let it happen to you. Be flexible, and be willing to invest time, resources, and money to win some clients. It is not a cost; it is an investment.

POC vs. Prototype vs. Pilot

Introducing a new solution or a product into a business means revising existing processes, changing existing ways of doing things, and training users on the new system. It is a hassle and a headache. So, you want to make sure the new product is meeting all expectations. How do you ensure that? By creating a proof of concept (POC), a prototype, running a pilot project, and eventually going live.

Many people ask me about the difference between a proof of concept, a prototype, and a pilot. So, let me demystify these three definitions for you to have a clear understanding of what you should offer your customers.

1. Proof of Concept (POC)

A POC is a small research that aims to validate an idea, strategy, or solution. A POC typically involves a demonstration that explores viability, risks, and alternatives at a high level. You can do a POC by conducting a demo, creating animation for design, sketching a diagram, conducting an experiment, or testing technology on a small part of a big system.

Typically, a POC is trying to answer questions such as:

- Will this solution meet our needs?
- Will this product perform as promised?
- Will the prospective end-user communities be productive with the new way of doing things?
- Will the ultimate solution be feasible?

2. Prototype

While a POC shows that a product or a feature *can be done* and it is feasible, a prototype explains *how it will be done* or how the final product may look. It is a sample, model, or release of a product. In technology, you may call a prototype, a minimum viable product (MVP).

So, if you are selling a physical product which is custom-built for your client, then you would want to make a prototype. An example of a prototype is a 3D print, a miniature, or a scale model.

3. Pilot

A pilot is a test of the *full* solution deployment but on a smaller group of users.

You would conduct a pilot if the solution you are selling is not a simple product, but a combination of hardware, software, and services. It's typically implemented in a phased approach over the course from weeks to months depending on the size of the deployment. The reason for doing a pilot is to get a better understanding of *how* the product will be used in the field and to refine the product. The scope is more significant than a POC but, still smaller than a full-scale implementation. Pilot tests not only the solution but also the company providing the solution.

For this book, we will assume that you are providing a service and not a physical product, so we don't get technical about doing a prototype or a pilot.

Action Steps:

For your product or service, which of the above three types is more suitable, a POC, a prototype, or a pilot?

How to Conduct a Successful POC

The following six steps are crucial for a successful POC:

1. Know the business requirements:

You should not start a POC without first defining the expected outcome of the POC. Both sides have to agree on what success looks like. So, it would be best if you decided on POC acceptance criteria. Once these criteria are achieved, the customer will declare acceptance and success of the POC.

You also have to agree on:

- The actions and steps that will be taken by both sides.
- How much effort each party will be investing in the POC.
- How long these efforts will take.
- How long the whole POC will last.
- When to decide to stop the POC in case things are dragging way beyond the POC completion date.

Action Steps:

Prepare a template for standard POC requirements that you are likely to use for your POCs. Use this template as a basis for any POC and modify it as needed.

2. Allocate the POC resources:

One of the critical elements of a successful POC is to choose the right staff from the customer side, who will support you and recommend you to the decision-maker upon completing a successful POC. I call these people *champions* because they will be raving fans for your solution if your POC succeeds.

These champions should be selected carefully by you and the customer. Note that most of the senior staff at your customer's company will be occupied with many other projects that may have higher priority than your POC. So, you must ensure 100% commitment of the champions by asking them to confirm in writing via a formal email, their availability and the availability of anyone on their team during the POC duration. You have to continuously reinstate and remind the champions that the decision-maker has indicated that the project is of high-importance and time is of the essence. Their commitment is crucial to the success of the POC.

If you notice that some of these champions are becoming less committed, showing less interest in the POC by missing critical meetings, ignoring important emails, and not doing their part of their commitment; you have to visit these champions and remind them of the decision-maker's instructions. Keep reminding them of the magnitude of the problem the company is facing and how crucial it is for them to help conduct a successful POC so that the solution can be implemented as soon as possible and not continue to make the company bleed.

Do not wait until the end of the POC to complain to the decision-maker about the lack of commitment from the champions. Take caution here; since most decision-makers hate it when anyone complains about their staff. You should do everything in your capacity to encourage champions to continue to support your POC action plans without having to complain about them. The complaint should be your last resort when all of your attempts to keep the champions committed to your POC timeline fails.

Your resources commitment:

Sometimes, the lack of commitment does not come from the customer's side; instead, it comes from your own company's head office. So, you must ensure that, before starting the POC, all of the resources in your commercial or technical staff are available and committed throughout the whole POC phase.

3. Choose the right area:

Some POCs need to be conducted in a specific area, which may have pre-requisites for safety and security throughout the POC phase. Make sure you get a commitment from the decision-maker before starting the POC that the company will provide a dedicated room, office, laboratory that your POC staff can have access to at any time.

If the POC area requires your staff and the champions to travel to another location, you need to provide adequate transportation throughout the POC duration. Do not neglect the logistics, and do not assume that somehow, they will be taken care of. This is your POC; you take charge to make sure that it succeeds. You are unlikely to get a second chance by the decision-maker for a second POC.

I have seen many POCs fail, not because the product was not good, but because the salesperson or the project manager was unable to take care of the small details and logistics while conducting the POC.

Actions Steps:

Does your POC need to be conducted in a specific location or environment? If so, prepare a checklist to be used for your POCs with all your customers.

4. Create a POC plan:

For any project to succeed, such as a POC, you need to have a document that specifies the following:

- The tasks required to be completed.
- Who will do these tasks.
- When they're expected to be done.
- How long each task will take.
- Which tasks can be done simultaneously.
- Which tasks would have to wait until a previous task is completed first.

You may wish to use project planning software that can be shared and accessed by all the people involved, from your side and the customer side. However, I have learned from previous experience that most people will fail to update the progress of a project unless someone reminds them by sending them one or two pages summarizing the progress status. Highlighting whether the project is going on track or off track and whether there are significant delays, who is responsible for them, and what is the action that needs to be taken.

An essential aspect of creating and managing the POC project plan is to highlight and agree with the champions, in advance, what happens in case of delays, neglects, no-shows, and incompletion of tasks by individual members of the POC project. A transparent process of preventing any delays from happening and an escalation process to senior management, in case it does occur, must be established and agreed upon by both parties, which must include who the people that will be involved in the escalation process are.

5. Conducting the POC:

During the POC, you must allow the champions to personally try the products for themselves by testing and experimenting with the features that you have agreed to test during the POC. It is crucial for them not only to delegate the task of trying your product to their staff but for the champions themselves to get involved and engaged in experimenting with your product.

It is vital that the actual users of your product, after it is purchased and implemented in the company, must be involved in the testing process. They should experiment using your product so that they can give their feedback on how easy it is to use the product and what concerns or questions they may have if the product is implemented in their department.

The more influences and champions you can collect who will give positive feedback about your product, the higher your chance of getting approval from the decision-maker to purchase your product. You don't want the decision-maker to ask whether all the concerned people got the opportunity to test the product and the response to be a “No” or “Not yet.”

You stand a better chance of acceptance if the POC report shows that every person who should be involved in the POC has used the product and has spent enough time experimenting and testing the product’s features and benefits, and their review and comments are favorable to your product. The validation of champions helps the decision-maker reduce the risk of making the wrong decision in accepting to purchase your POC.

Limited features and options:

You should not overload your product with every feature or option during the POC phase. Instead, you should only display the necessary options that demonstrate the robust capabilities of your product to solve the problem of the customer effectively.

One of the common mistakes I see in many POCs is that the supplier tries to show off every feature, benefit, or option in their product during the POC phase. Later, the supplier lives to regret this "showing-off" decision when one of these features do not function as expected. This mistake jeopardizes the whole success of the POC and ends up costing the supplier the loss of a multi-million-dollar deal only as a result of ego.

Another common mistake I see some companies make in POCs is agreeing to eliminate a core feature of a product based on a customer's request. Eliminating such important features could end up making the whole value proposition of the product no longer appealing after the POC is completed. My advice to you is not to make such a mistake and be extremely careful when to say "yes" to your customer's demands. You are the expert in your field, and you should advise the customer what is best for him.

Here is a real-life example of the above point. In Egypt, a mobile operator asked a supplier, whom I invested in, to remove the feature of customer profiling from a mobile advertisement service. The service allowed callers to the platform to place calls to their friends and family free of cost because an advertiser sponsored them.

The mobile operator wanted to test this service before going live on a small group of 200,000 subscribers. The POC team from the operator side insisted on removing the main feature of customer profiling from the POC because they felt it might confuse the caller. The supplier objected and said that this would impact the offering to the advertiser, who will not be able to select the right profile of the customer and will have to do mass advertisements instead of targeted ads. This elimination of a feature may kill the whole unique selling proposition of the product. Despite several discussions, the mobile operator insisted on removing profiling and promised the supplier to allow for profiling in the main product launch, which targeted 24 million subscribers.

The supplier, after a lot of hesitation, agreed to do the POC without profiling only to live to regret that decision. Three months into the POC, the mobile company called the supplier and asked to stop the POC and cancel the project as the CEO rejected it.

When the supplier asked for the reason for the rejection, the answer was: "Well, our sales team tried to sell advertising spots to large fast moving consumer goods companies (FMCGs) but failed to sell a single ad. It seems in this digital world of social media, no one wants to do a mass advertisement anymore. The FMCGs said if they can't target a specific segment with their advertisement, then they are wasting money advertising their product to a segment which is not their target audience. Most companies now allocate more than 70% of their campaign to targeted ads. The day of mass advertisement is long gone."

The angry supplier replied: "I warned you about this issue before we started the POC. *You* are the one who insisted that we remove customer profiling, and now you are telling me that your CEO rejected my project because of something you have asked to be removed from my product! That's not fair. It was your wrong decision, not mine."

The mobile operator manager: "Yes, I know we did ask you to remove profiling from the product, but at the time, we didn't expect that it will be such a big deal for the advertiser. We thought it would not impact the advertiser's decision to buy the spots. I guess we were wrong. Sorry about that. Let me know if you have any other products you want to present to us. This one is rejected, and the CEO does not want us to spend more time on it. He decided that we would move on to something else."

The supplier replied: “No, thank you. I don’t want to lose another three months of my life and $125,000 doing another POC for your company. I will go elsewhere, and this time I will not accept anyone to change my core product offering. Lesson learned. Thank you for wasting my time and money.”

Unfortunately, this POC ended badly because the supplier did not control the POC well, and allowed the customer to dictate his terms. The lesson here is that it is important to always consider your customer’s needs and requirements, but never compromise your product’s core offering to please the customer.

Let your distinct features shine:
You also want to make sure that you demonstrate your distinct options and features that your competitor does not have. You want to highlight to the champions how these features are crucial to the solution of the customer's problem. The champions have to feel that even if they get a better and cheaper price with favorable payment terms from your competitors, they will be jeopardizing the absence of some of the essential features that only your product has.

A POC is a great way of showing your unique selling proposition over your competitors and over any other possible options, which the champions and influences may consider to solve their problem. And for that reason, many tenders in large companies are won by the company who had succeeded in conducting a successful POC before the bid was even announced.

Document everything:
Another big mistake I often see while conducting POCs is the absence of proper documentation of all the POCs incidents, tests, experiments, and feedback from the champions.

All the data and feedback are vital to have, as you will use them to build a solid final pitch to the decision-maker. The last thing you want is to spend weeks or months conducting a POC only to appear in front of the decision-maker with a very weak or shallow presentation and report.

The objective of the POC is not only to positively influence the champions and influencers, but it is also to gather the feedback and clarify the needs of your customer, and later, custom-build your product to the updated requirements of the customer.

Using the POC collected data, your report should confirm that all of the requirements of the solution, have been tested by the influencers and champions. This verification process leaves no room for anyone to question whether your product can solve the problem or whether it has all the required features.

Action Steps:

Create a template or a checklist to record all of your POC incidents, tests, experiments, and feedback from your customer.

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Sharing the results with the champions and influencers:

After the POC has ended, send a copy of the report to the influencers and champions. Ask them for comments or feedback on the data and the results before submitting the report to the decision-maker. This step will give you sufficient time to fix any problems or answer any concerns the influencers and champions may have before approaching the decision-maker to present the report.

When you do present the results of the report, inform the decision-maker that you have shared the report with all concerned parties and influencers and champions, and you have addressed all concerns about the results of the POC, which means everyone's acceptance of the POC results.

This step is crucial and of high importance and should not be neglected at any cost. You have to eliminate any chance of an influencer or a champion showing off that he has spotted a weakness in your product, raise an objection, or found a failure in the POC or the product. Inform the decision-maker that you have given influencers and champions ample time, to not only experiment with the product and test it for themselves, but also shared with him all the findings, data, and information confirming that the product is capable of delivering the promised solution.

6. Report the POC results:

Once you have finalized your POC report, you have to get it signed off by the champions and influencers, confirming their acceptance of the results. Failure to get them to sign off may jeopardize your position during the decision-maker pitch.

A champion's signature confirms that they have accepted the results of the POC, and there is no room for a change of opinion at the later stage. So, if any of the champions have a concern, you should demonstrate to the person immediately how the product can address that concern; and once the person is satisfied with what he has seen, ask him to sign that he is confident with what he has seen in the demonstration. If he refuses to sign, it means he still has doubts; your job then is to immediately remove these doubts and rectify any concerns the person may have during the POC. Then ask him to sign.

You can't afford to have any surprises during a decision-maker's pitch by one of the champions and influencers raising a concern. These concerns should have been signed off during the POC. In the pitch meeting, your objective is to let the decision-maker hear for himself from the influences and champions that they have seen the product in person, experimented with it, have confirmed that the product does deliver what it promises, and the product is capable of solving the problem. These testimonies from the champions should leave no room for any doubt to crawl into the mind of the decision-maker.

Action Steps:

For your product or services, prepare a POC checklist that ensures that all of the above six steps are agreed with by your customers before starting the POC.

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What's next?

Since I have covered in chapter 3 what to do after the POC pitch by giving the decision-maker three implementations options to choose from, we won't go over them again.

In the next chapter, assuming you have been awarded the project or the bid, we will cover how to deliver your product remarkably.

Step 5: The Performance

"Exceeding expectations is where satisfaction ends, and loyalty begins"

–Ron Kaufman

Delivering a Remarkable Product

The Product Implementation

Once the customer has purchased the product after you have conducted a successful POC, it is now your time to shine and deliver on all your promises to the decision-maker and the company.

Systems and Processes

The secret for remarkable delivery of your product is simple: it is to have systems and processes throughout the whole organization, specifically in the product delivery and implementation division. You must follow specific and clear and detailed processes and procedures in implementing and delivering any product to your customers. By ignoring these specifics when producing a set of systems and processes for your product delivery, you are unnecessarily risking upsetting your customers. With no procedures in place, there is a chance of mistakes happening, staff not doing what they are supposed to do, products not arriving when they should arrive, things not working as they are supposed to work, and promises made to customers may be broken.

You have to build your company systematically so that it functions in a way that delivers a flawless implementation of your product without a single fault. If you are currently a salesperson working for a company that does not have a professional product implementation system, you are risking your reputation of not being able to deliver what you promise to customers. I advise all salespeople before accepting any position with any company to check their delivery process before accepting the offer. A professional company will always pride itself on having a system that ensures that nothing is left to chance when it comes to delivering their promises to their customers.

There are many courses, workshops, books, videos, online and off-line that could help you to build an excellent implementation system which leaves no excuse for you not to know how to make a successful system and process for implementing your product. One of the fastest ways that you can start building a good system is to have checklists that are signed by your team for each task that needs to be conducted. Once you have developed these checklists, you can hand them to a professional process building company that can combine these checklists into software for collaboration. This software will ensure that the whole company is aligned and all the dedicated staff knows precisely what needs to get done, when it needs to get done, who needs to do it, and if things don't work out, whom to go to for help.

Have the right team

Once you have a good process for product implementation, the second important aspect of delivering a remarkable product is to have the right team to execute each step in the process. This team must be held accountable for the professional delivery of each task assigned to them. Therefore, they have to be well selected, trained, coached, and managed.

If you hire mediocre delivery staff, their delivery, even using the best systems and processes, will be mediocre. Hiring key people is one area of your business or company that should not be jeopardized. Make sure you thoroughly assess the skills needed for every person in your product implementation team; then go out and hire the best people who match the skills you are seeking, then train them well. Make sure that you always have a backup plan in case these people leave your company for whatever reason.

Have an implementation plan

In the same way you had the POC project plan, you would also need to have an implementation plan for every single customer you sign on. This implementation plan has to have a project manager, supervisor, team leaders, and a clear reporting line who will oversee the implementation process and ensure that the implementation team follows the plan strictly without fail.

Many companies use software to manage their product implementation, the software is usually accessible at the office, at the warehouse, at the client sites, and through the implementation team mobile devices and phones. Invest in a good platform and make sure that the software leaves no room for any mistake to go unnoticed by any of the implementation team managers.

Deliver 100% of the 70%:

Always promise 70% of what you plan to deliver to your customer and make sure you deliver 100% of the 70% of the promises you made. Also, once you are done fulfilling your 100% of the promises you made, surprise your customer by delivering an extra 30% of things that will *wow* them. This 30 % could be features and benefits that they didn't expect to be added for free, services and ideas that will make their product-using experience more special, which they never anticipated. The surprises of little small details will impress them and please them beyond what they could have imagined.

Nobody gets excited about any product implementation or service delivery that delivered on what was promised, but everybody gets excited and becomes extremely happy if they see that the company delivering the product has gone out of its way to make the experience remarkable for the customer.

Most of us can relate to an amazing previous experience we had at a hotel, an airline, a restaurant, or other service-oriented businesses, where we were pleasantly happy about a surprise. A room upgrade at a hotel, a free dessert added to a meal, or a seat upgrade in an airplane.

These are all pleasant surprises that are 30% more than what we were promised. Many times, these businesses already planned to provide this extra 30% at the offset, but they chose not to inform you and instead surprise you during the delivery of their service.

A birthday surprise does not have the same effect if you already know about it ahead of time. You should always aim to deliver way beyond what you have promised your customers. Then even if things don't go as planned and you make mistakes during the implementation, the additional 30% extra of items or services that they didn’t expect, will help them forgive you for making a mistake in your 70% delivery.

Be there for them

A good company does not end its relationship with its customers after a successful implementation is completed. I believe your job in building a great relationship with the customer starts after the implementation, not before.

Many businesses build a wow factor based on the interaction with customers after the implementation by calling them and ensuring that they are 100% happy with what was delivered and implemented to them. Good companies visit the customer regularly and check on them to make sure that everything is working as promised. They also make sure that they are accessible to the customer 24/7 at any time in case they need help.

I highly advise you to have a 24/7 support line available to all your customers where they can speak to a human being, not a machine. They can share their concerns, feedback, dissatisfaction, lack of clarity, or simply request to purchase more benefits and features to add to a product they have already purchased from you.

I'm not too fond of companies that try to get smart by reducing the costs by digitizing their customer support functions, thinking that this cost-cutting will increase their profits and grow their company faster. Little do they know that the day they expected to remove people from interacting with their customers is the day their company began to decline.

The same way we decided to have humans selling products and making promises to our customers and get their money, we have to use humans to deliver what we have promised and to be there for our customers when they need to solve a problem.

I appreciate that sometimes it is much easier to purchase a product without speaking to a human being by simply going online, selecting a product, entering your payment details, and clicking the “complete purchase” button; but when it comes to solving the problem of a customer, most customers want to talk to someone to express how they feel. They want to explain how confused they are. This is impossible to do if they are talking to a machine, especially if customers don't know what the problem is or how to solve it.

My advice to you is that after you complete your remarkable implementation, provide every person who needs to use or interact with your product, clear set-by-step information about where to go if they need help, whom to call, and how to reach the support team 24/7.

Do not neglect this step. It could be the main reason for getting future business from your customers. So, if you wish to grow your sales and sell to more prominent companies, always make sure you have 24/7 support. It is an investment that will pay off in multiples.

Action Steps:

Since every product or service is different and requires different processes and procedures, I will leave it to you to come up with your own set of systems and processes. What I can help you with in this chapter is to show you the steps you need to follow in coming up with a process for a successful implementation.

Here it is:

1. Make a list of all the tasks that need to take place for the implementation. Do not skip any task, no matter how small or simple.

2. Review the task and double-check if you have missed a step in the process. Add or delete as necessary.

3. Using an online flow chart design portal, design a flow chart clearly showing how each task and step will be carried out in the process. If the implementation process is extensive, you may need to design multiple flow charts for each section of your implementation process.

4. While designing your flow chart, think about the risk of what will happen if a task is skipped, a form was not filed, or someone forgot something in the process, mitigate that risk by thinking of what task or steps need to be added to the process to prevent any mistake from happening.

5. Once you are happy with the flow chart, convert the tasks into a list. Then next to each task, identify the person or staff in your company that will be responsible for completing the task.

6. Identify the duration of each task.

7. Subscribe your whole team to a team collaboration software which you will use to coordinate with all your staff during the implementation phase to ensure error-free implementation.
8. Add all the steps you have listed into the team collaboration software.
9. Train your team on how to use the software.
10. Whenever you have an implementation for a customer, use the team collaboration software and follow the process you have designed.

My staff uses the following software:

- For designing the flow charts: Lucidchart.com, you may also use Microsoft Office Visio, or draw.io—I am not affiliated with any of this software, so use whichever software suits you.
- For team collaboration: Redbooth.com, you may also use basecamp.com or slack.com.

Moving Forward:

We have covered pretty much all the essential elements of how to win big deals with large companies. For you to win such contracts and continue to win them, you will need a crucial element which we did not cover in detail yet. An amazing team. A team that will help you achieve all of the above.

In the next and final chapter, I will share with you how to design the perfect team, how to find them, interview them, and convince them to join you. Let's move on to the final chapter.

Step 6: The People

"Great things in business are never done by one person. They are done by a team of people"

–Steve Jobs

When entering a new market, many small companies tend to keep their human resources cost at a minimum, thinking that they don't need to hire a team before they land a project. They figure that once they win a project, they can use the first payment from the customer to hire more people to deliver the project. So, at the offset, they hire one person to do all of the previous tasks, which are as follows:

1. Setting up their office operations
2. Conducting market research
3. Pitching to the decision-maker
4. Doing the POC
5. Managing the delivery of the product
6. Providing support after the customer buys

If you can hire one person to do all of the above, then I would probably imagine this person's name is Superman or Wonder Woman.

A friend of mine, who is a lawyer, worked with a large European company who came to Dubai with the agenda of taking market share from a well-established American competitor that had 84% of the market. The American competitor had an office in Dubai with

196 full-time staff. So, the European company tried to play it smart and decided that they can beat the prices of their competitors by having a low overhead cost. So, they hired one person to run their new operations in Dubai. Two and a half years later, they ended up spending more than €300,000 but did not win a single project. They have zero market share while their competitors grew to 87% of the market. You can't use a one-man band to beat a competitor who has 87% of the market and a small army of 196 employees. That's just plain stupid.

My advice to any company that wishes to operate in a new market is to hire a full team if they are serious about getting market share. A one-man band will not do it. So, the best first hire is the marketing manager and the sales manager. Their job is to conduct market research by doing lots of discovery meetings, gather intelligence, do a market-entry strategy, and then prepare the pitch to decision-makers. Once a decision-maker confirms his acceptance to do a POC, that is when a specialize POC project manager should be sent to the country or hired locally. And once a sale happens, then a project manager has to be brought to the scene to ensure the smooth delivery of the project. After the product has been delivered, a support manager needs to be assigned to the customer to provide 24 x 7 support services.

If you are a small company and you really can't afford to hire a full team, then it may be best for you to hire a sales and marketing manager and only when the deal is closed do you go ahead and hire the rest of the team that will deliver the product. You must not ask the sales and marketing manager to do all of the other tasks that require more specialized knowledge and experience. The more non-specialized tasks you give to the sales and marketing manager, which are outside of his scope of work, the less time he will have to focus on hunting for more customers for you, which results in losses of opportunities and revenue.

How to Hire Well

Before explaining how to hire well, you are maybe wondering if it is possible to enter a new market without hiring someone local at all and have staff fly in and out of the country whenever it is required. This approach is called “The traveling salesperson” market entry approach.

In my opinion, this approach does not work in the Middle East. It is the same thing with long-distance intimate relationships. They don't work. How can you possibly build an intimate relationship with a loved one living in another country? Intimate relationship need time, effort, and energy to fuel the intimacy, so the couple has to see each other regularly to share the love, tender, and care to each other.

In business, the same applies, you can't possibly build a strong business relationship with a traveling briefcase and fly into the country to show up only for meetings and then fly out. If you are serious about building your business in a country, you need to be permanently there. You need to have boots on the ground.

One of our partners from an Asian country tried to operate this way for ten months. My team set up 28 meetings for him with decision-makers of the public and private sector in Dubai. He had to fly in his sales director eight times to Dubai during those ten months. Guess how many meetings converted to a sale? You guessed right, zero. Why zero? Because clients felt that the Asian company was not serious about committing to the market.

A common question most of the decision-makers ask is: “So, Mr. Smith, where is your office located in Dubai? And how long have you been operating in Dubai?”

Salesman reply: “Well, aahh, ammm…, we actually don't have an office in Dubai yet. We are operating from our head office in

Singapore for now. As soon as we sign the contract with you, we will send some of our staff to Dubai to implement the solution and provide the needed support."

Client: "Oh, I see. Okay. So, how long will it take you to have people on the ground to deliver the solution if we decide to buy it today?"

Salesman: "Well, we can have them here next week?"

Client: "And how much experience do these people have with the local government regulations, permits, approvals, ….etc.? And would they have a working permit from immigration to work on implementing the solution?"

Salesman: "No, they don't have an immigration work permit yet; but they can get a visitor's visa at the airport and work as visitors for a while. During that period, we can apply for their working permits simultaneously. It shouldn't take long, right? And I am sure they can find out what government permits and approvals we need to be able to implement the solution."

Client: "So, what I hear you saying is, you don't know what government permits you need, you don't know how long it will take you to get these permits, you don't have local staff on the ground, you don't have working permits for the implementation team, you will have your staff work illegally while you apply for their work permits, and you don't even know whether they will get approved for the work permits or not? Yet, you are confident you can conduct the implementation next week if I give you an order today?"

Salesman: "Well, yes, you are right. I don't know these things, but I am sure work permits and government permits are not a big deal to get here in Dubai, I am assuming it shouldn't take a long time."

Client: "Okay, I understand. You are assuming these things. Okay. So, Mr. Smith, why don't you leave me your brochure, your presentation slides, and your business card, and I will get back to you in a few days with my answer? Thank you for coming. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Salesman: "Sure, thank you for the meeting. I am looking forward to hearing from you soon."

The Asian company did not hear back from the client. And their follow-up calls went unanswered.

When my team called the decision-makers of these companies to inquire why the Asian company did not get the deal, the answer was something like this: "You didn't expect us to agree to give them the project. Did you? The company is not serious about doing business here in Dubai. If they were, they would have invested in having local staff who are well-trained and experienced in implementing the solution. They would have working permits, know how to operate in the local market, know the local government regulations, and can move fast to implement the solution. We don't want to risk giving the project to a company which operates from Singapore and has zero experience in the local market, and we will be the Guinea pigs for their first project. No, thank you. Other competitors don't have these limitations. They already have local staff, trained, experienced, ready to implement, and are based in Dubai, so when we need their support to fix a problem, they are only a 30-minutes call away. For those reasons, we will not take the risk of working with the Singaporean company."

Our next question to the decision-maker was: "So, why didn't you tell them this objection during the meeting? Why did you tell the sales director to leave his brochure and you will contact him later when you had no intention to do so?"

Client: "Come on! You are a local person. You know it is not part of our culture to show a guest that they are not welcomed. So, we couldn't tell them these objections to their faces. Out of respect to their team, we were polite to say that we will get back to them."

The moral of the story is noticeable; don't start knocking on the client's doors when you don't have a local team on the ground. The client may entertain the meeting, but you will not be taken seriously. So, it is better not to burn your chances. Have the team on the ground first, then start knocking on doors and show the client that you are serious about this market, and you are ready for business. Operating as a traveling salesman with a briefcase does not work. These days are long gone. If your competitor is on the ground and has a local team, you can't start with a disadvantage of not having your team on the ground.

Start with the Job, not the Person:

One of the classic mistakes I see many business owners commit is when they come across a candidate whom they like as a person. They try to fit them within the company by creating a position that doesn't exist. Let me give you a piece of advice here: just because you like a candidate and you think they are so pleasant and positive, that does not make them fit to do the job. Productivity and high performance are not about likability and popularity. It's about the person having the necessary set of skills, competencies, self-discipline, commitment, and desire to excel.

The first thing that is obvious to do before hiring any staff is to write down a detailed job description and requirements. The job description should outline precisely what this person would be expected to do. Be careful when you write the job description; it should not be too vague and too general. Be very specific about the skills and competencies the person needs to have for him to exceed your expectations and the expectations of the customer.

The Local Language:

So, what should you write in the job description if you're entering a new foreign market? The logical must-have is that the person you hire needs to speak the local language of the country that he would be operating in, and must have local market experience interacting and working with potential customers in your target industry.

Many international companies make the mistake of assigning someone from the head office to a new market who does not speak the local language, does not have the local market experience, and never interacted with local companies in the target industry. The person is a foreigner himself and does not understand the culture, doesn't have the proper communication skills, and all he has is sales and marketing skills from a completely different market.

Even though it is common sense, many companies continue to make this mistake because they are more comfortable with assigning someone that they know and trust to a new market rather than hiring locally. However, the skill required for entering a new market is not about you trusting an employee, it's about whether the assigned person can deliver what you want, which is closing a deal in a foreign market. However, if the person you assigned does not understand the local language, the culture, has no local contacts, has no local experience, and will likely take a long time to build his confidence, how do you expect this person to succeed?

When putting a team together in a new market, my advice to you is to hire advisors and consultants who will help you in finding the right local people who meet the criteria and who can do the job effectively. Once you hire a senior person of this caliber, then you fly him to your country and train him on your product and services. Usually, this head office intensive training should not take more than two weeks to a month.

Once the training is completed, you will have a well-trained locally-experienced senior manager whose job then is to build a competent team of professionals.

So, who should you hire first in this competent team of professionals?

Answer: A smart local sales and marketing senior manager.

Hiring the Sales and Marketing Senior Manager

The job description of the local sales and marketing manager should include the following:

- Conduct your online or offline market research
- Conduct discovery meetings to validate all assumptions
- Study the findings of this research by analyzing all the gathered data
- Write a report and present the report using PowerPoint slides to the decision-maker
- Be well-experienced in the art of pitching, negotiating and have superior communication skills

There is no point in trying to sell a product in a new market that the research indicated is not suitable for the market. There is also no point pitching this product to a decision-maker if the product is not ready to be sold considering the local market conditions. So, the sales and marketing manager should have the necessary communication skills to convince the design team to modify the product when needed.

The sales and marketing manager should also be able to influence the head office's seniors to add more staff to the new local office when required. The addition of staff may include engineers, marketing people, more salespeople, POC project managers, product delivery managers, and support staff. If the communication skills of the sales and marketing manager are not strong enough, he would be unlikely successful in convincing the head office to invest in more resources.

He also must be able to convince the head office to invest in the POC, set up a demo facility, rent a bigger office, or invest more in R&D in the target market.

The critical communication skills of this manager should allow him to consult, educate, advise, and influence the decision-maker. The decision-maker must be convinced to let the sales and marketing manager conduct the POC in his company, guide him and his team on how to buy the product that he is selling, and why this is the best time to purchase the product.

Remember, most decision-makers do not want to take the time to figure out things; many of them may not have the knowledge or skills necessary to evaluate your proposal and make an effective buying decision. So, your sales and marketing manager's role is to make this task easy for the decision-maker. The better communicator this manager is, the easier it will be to close the deal.

Other essential competencies and skills required of this person are as follows:

- Presentable, good-looking, and attractive
- Speaks the local language
- Slick
- Demands respect
- Intelligent
- Skilled in communication and impressive in front of an audience
- Competent and capable
- Fast learner
- Coachable and willing to learn fast
- Must have a minimum of five years' experience in selling and marketing products and services in the new market.
- Must be willing to travel at any time.

Action Steps:

1. Write a clear job description of a perfect sales & marketing manager who will be a perfect fit for your organization.

2. If you already have a sales & marketing manager, check their skills and experience against your job description and see if there is a fit. If you don't see a fit, consider hiring someone new.

Hiring the POC Project Manager

Once a POC project has been given the green light, you need to have a dedicated project manager who has specific skills which will allow him to execute the POC professionally. This includes ensuring communication with all the stakeholders, documenting all of the data, and putting it together in a professional presentation for the decision-maker and influencers.

This POC project manager must be experienced in knowing how to put together a POC team from both sides. Your side, and the target customer's side.

Your POC Team:

The POC project manager should select people from the head office who are experienced in conducting a commercial and a technical POC. This team must be able to choose the right location of the POC, install the proper testing equipment, and set up all the needed aspects of conducting an error-free POC platform. Also, to have the required technical skills, the team must be able to communicate clearly when asked questions by the customer's POC team or use a translator who must be available at all times.

The Target Customer's POC Team:

During your pitch to the decision-maker, please take the opportunity of his presence and ask him to allocate specific commercial and technical staff who are influencers and champions for your product. The more influencers you have in the POC evaluation team, the higher the chance your POC will be successful and translate to a direct award order of your solution instead of going thru a tender procurement process.

Many suppliers make the mistake of allowing the customer to select the POC team who may not be qualified nor have the skills to evaluate a POC professionally. This is a mistake that could cost you the loss of the deal.

Please don't leave the selection of their evaluation team to the decision-maker or somebody else in your customer's company. It is your core responsibility to advise and educate the customer on everything during the POC stage, including whom they should select for their POC evaluation team.

I have seen many deals go down the drain during the POC phase simply because the customer does not have the correct evaluation team from their side. Do not underestimate the importance of this point.

The Role of the POC Project Manager:

The POC manager should define and agree on the expected outcome of the POC. He should put together a clear project plan and assign clear roles and responsibilities to both teams with clear deadlines for each task during the POC phase.

Once the two teams have been agreed on and the tests to be conducted during the POC, the two groups should decide on the expected outcome and the success criteria. Throughout the POC, your project manager should have the skills necessary to manage both teams effectively.

It is solely the POC project manager's responsibility to eliminate any chance of delays or lack of commitment from any side of the POC teams. So, having the right project-management skills is a core trait that no POC project manager should lack.

POC projects usually fail not because the product was unable to deliver on its promises; instead, people do not do what they agree to do on the timeline that they have to work within.

A competent POC project manager should have the right communication and assertiveness skills to ensure that each team sticks to what they committed to do when they said they would do it. Therefore, you must hire the right project manager who has a strong personality with assertiveness and professionalism.

Knowing how to manage a team is another critical skill required for the POC project manager. He needs to know how to work with multiple teams simultaneously, and know how to address the needs of each team without stepping on the toes of other teams

Once the POC is completed, the POC project manager should assist the sales and marketing manager in articulating all the information, feedback, data, and findings. The results of the POC will be turned into a professionally written report and an executive summary PowerPoint presentation, which should be submitted and presented to the decision-maker.

Therefore, the POC manager should be experienced in analyzing, evaluating, and assessing all the findings of the POC, and can translate complicated technical information into a plain simple language in the format of a report. This report should demonstrate to the decision-maker the results of the POC, indicating that the problem does exist, it is a significant problem, and your product has all the needed features which can solve the problem quickly without fail.

The Investment in a POC Project Manager:

As you can see from the above skills required in a POC project manager, asking the sales and marketing manager to do the job of the POC project manager is illogical. Therefore, you should invest in a competent POC project manager who will deliver a POC professionally on time and help you seal the deal.

If you don't have many customers who agree to do POCs, you can save on such an expense by hiring a POC project manager on a project-by-project basis so that you don't have to have him or her on your payroll on a full-time basis.

Action Steps:

1. Write a clear job description of a perfect POC project manager who would be a perfect fit for your organization.

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2. If you already have a POC project manager, check your current POC project manager's skills and experience against your job description and see if there is a fit. If you don't see a fit, consider hiring someone new.

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Hiring an Implementation Manager

Once your sales & marketing manager succeeds in convincing the decision-maker to go ahead and purchase the product, you need a project manager to deliver and implement all of the products and services of your solution.

Even though both the POC and the delivery of the project require somewhat similar project-management skills, the implementation manager's scope is a much broader and more sophisticated scope than the POC manager. Some companies use the same POC project manager as an implementation manager. Although this is possible for smaller companies, I do not advise you to follow this option because the implementation and the delivery of a product require more time, resources, and more attention to details than a POC.

As discussed in the previous chapter, delivering and implementing a product remarkably well requires the delivery team to follow many sophisticated processes, which require a more detailed-oriented person to manage the process to ensure flawless delivery.

Some companies have a senior implementation manager and under him have junior managers responsible for delivering smaller aspects of the project. It all depends on how sophisticated and complicated your product delivery process.

Required Skills:

An implementation manager's role is to manage a team of implementation specialists that are responsible for the implementation of technical systems, software, hardware, or other products and solutions.

Part of the role of an implementation manager is to review the customer's demands, develop project plans, and ensure that implementations are completed on time, within budget, and meet client expectations.

Therefore, these are some of the skills required, make sure your implementation manager has them:

- Effective relationship management skills with excellent business judgment, strong common sense, and a logical mind.
- Solid understanding of the asset management workflows, operations, practices, and processes.
- Strong communication, influencing, and negotiation skills.
- Project management experience.
- Team management experience.
- Conflict management experience.

Communication Skills:

An implementation manager needs to have excellent communication skills which are required to do the following activities:

- Clarifying the delivery expectations with the customer’s team.
- Agreeing on the delivery project plan with the customer's team.
- Agreeing on the hardware and software and other related resources required from the customer's team to deliver the product as per the project plan.
- Agreeing on the availability of the necessary staff from the customer’s team to deliver the products and services as per the project plan.
- Ensuring that all the people involved in the project do what they said they would do on the assigned due date of each task.

- Addressing different audiences using audience-appropriate language to communicate their meaning clearly and efficiently.

Training the Customer:

Once the product has been delivered and installed completely, the implementation manager should educate all the stakeholders across the whole company who will be using the product by working directly with the training manager and ensuring that all the product features are working correctly before, during, and after the training.

Some companies choose to hire a dedicated training manager, while others use the implementation manager to conduct the training. In my opinion, this is not advisable. The skills needed for a training manager are entirely different from an implementation manager. I advise you to hire a specialized training manager, even on a project-by-project basis, to ensure that not only your product has been installed and delivered well, but also the training is conducted in a professional manner.

Selling More Features:

One of the crucial skills of an implementation manager is to have some influence and sales skills; because many customers do not recognize the need for certain features of a product until it is fully installed on their premises and they start using it. That is when the customer figures out that they require additional features to be added.

This is where your implementation manager's sales & influencing skills are needed to convince the customer to purchase those additional features immediately while the delivery team is on the site. Convincing the customer to act quickly will cost them less and will be much faster since the delivery team is right there.

In case the implementation project manager lacks the sales and influence skills, he may involve the sales and marketing manager to take over this vital role during the product delivery process.

Action Steps:

1. Write a clear job description of a perfect implementation manager who will be a perfect fit for your organization.

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2. If you already have an implementation manager, check your current implementation manager’s skills and experience against your job description and see if there is a fit. If you don’t see a fit, consider hiring someone new.

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Hiring the Customer Support Manager

Once the product has been professionally installed, the training has been completed, and the customer is now using the product; the customer may have queries about how to use a specific aspect of the product, which the training manager may have not explained well. This is where a support manager is needed to manage the customer's requirements regularly.

The customer support manager's role is to ensure a customer receives outstanding support and all their needs are met. This may involve creating customer support policies and procedures for staff to adhere to, training and observing employees, and assisting unsatisfied users. Customer support managers oversee the customer support department’s day-to-day functions.

The customer support managers supervise customer support agents and report to a general manager, thus making them middle-management level officers.

Service Level Agreement:

Companies usually agree on the support level that they would need after the implementation during the contract signing. A service level agreement (SLA) is generally added as an annex to the purchasing contract. There are many details in the SLA, including response time, resource allocation, fixing time, problem escalation process, and other significant problem-solving aspects.

Required Skills:

A customer support manager needs to ensure that all the dedicated support level services are delivered professionally after the product has been implemented. Therefore, the skills required for the support manager must include:

- Excellent communication skills
- Training skills

- On-site and off-site support skills
- Understanding of customer service practices
- Knowing mediation and conflict resolution techniques
- Analyzing system data
- Conflict resolution skills
- Diplomacy and tactfulness in dealing with angry customers

In case your company has a dedicated customer support call center, the customer service manager should have some experience working in a call center environment and the call center's tracking and management systems.

Usually, one person is not enough to support a customer, especially if the support is committed to being on a 24 x 7 basis. A support team needs to be available at either a remote location or on the customer's site. Some customers require that a support team is available on their premises, at least for the first 90 days after the implementation of the product. The customer support manager also needs to have recruitment and training skills to hire the right support team.

Similar to the delivery manager, a customer support manager should have some influence and selling skills to influence the customer to upgrade the product. If during the support phase the customer asks about additional options, the customer support manager should use this opportunity to cross-sell more options and features to the customer. Or, they may choose to involve the sales and marketing manager to do this immediately.

Action Steps:

1. Write a clear job description of a perfect support manager who will be a perfect fit for your organization.

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2. If you already have a support manager, check your current support manager's skills and experience against your job description and see if there is a fit. If you don't see a fit, consider hiring someone new.

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Where to Find the Right Candidates

I advise you to source all of the above employees locally. You could achieve this by assigning a recruitment agency to conduct the interview process. Or ask your HR manager to spend some time in the local market and do the recruitment process personally.

The following are several methods of recruitment which you may wish to consider:

1. Your Local Partner's Network:

Your local partner may be one of the best sources of recommendations for hiring the right people to conduct the above tasks professionally. He could refer to you candidates who may have undertaken similar projects with other customers in the local market who have shown professional execution of these tasks. Your local partner would have years of experience working in the local market in the same sector. His contacts and networks of professional candidates would be much more extensive than yours. So start your search by involving your local partner first before considering other options.

2. LinkedIn and Online Questionnaire:

People have different opinions about the effectiveness of LinkedIn as a search and recruitment tool for professional candidates. I believe LinkedIn is the second most effective platform to provide you with potential candidates from the local market after considering your local partner networks of contacts.

In all of my 12 companies, all of my recruitment managers use LinkedIn extensively to hire locally and internationally, as they find LinkedIn a handy tool that is efficient and produces excellent results. However, just like any other platform, the more refined your search on LinkedIn, the better results you will get.

My HR managers use a self-interviewing questionnaire after launching a LinkedIn campaign, which helps greatly to filter and shortlist candidates without him having to call or speak to any of the candidates. By using online questionnaires to ask specific questions which require a minimum score to pass, you save everyone's time and get the best candidates.

We have significantly increased the quality of the candidates we hire by more than 70% using this questionnaire filtration method. I can't recommend it enough.

3. Recruitment Agencies:

Although with digital recruitment platforms seriously affecting recruitment agencies throughout the world, some of the industry-specialized recruitment agencies still do a great job of finding industry-focused candidates.

The competition of digital search and recruitment platforms such as LinkedIn, have brought prices of recruitment agencies services down significantly. Recruitment agencies are no longer the only available option to search for suitable candidates. Use your negotiation skills to get the best rate from recruitment agencies whom many operate on a success basis, so if they don't find the right candidate for you, their services are free.

Many of them require an exclusivity agreement to be signed, which I do not recommend since recruitment processes take a long time. If an agency is not competent in their search, they could delay your recruitment process by months. This is not something you can afford when delivering a product or doing a POC with a customer.

4. Your Competitors' Employees:

Another good source for finding potential candidates are people you may have met during your market research at your competitors' offices.

Although some people may consider hiring people from your competitor as unethical and unprofessional, I see differently. I believe people are not slaves who are owned by a corporation. We are not in the slave era. People are free to pursue whatever career opportunity knocks on their door, including opportunities available at your competitors' companies. If a competitor fails to maintain the interest and loyalty of his employee, that is not your fault.

If a competitor does not wish his core employees to leave him, then he must ensure their loyalty. Failure to maintain the interest of core employees in a company cannot be blamed on others who wish to recruit them for a better offer. If you don't want a competitor to attract your core employees, make sure you do everything to maintain their interest to stay.

I usually would not contact my competitor's employees directly; I would appoint a headhunter to do the job. This way, I can continue to protect my identity. Sometimes, potential candidates working for your competitors may use this recruitment opportunity to extract information from you about projects or key customers you are working with. Therefore, having a professional headhunter to contact them, without revealing your company's name, is a much safer approach.

5. Ex-employees at Your Customers' Companies:

Another good place to hire critical employees is people who used to work at your target customer companies but left them a year or two earlier. These employees could be of significant assets to you, considering the extensive experience they have, not only in the industry but also in the target company that you are trying to sell to.

They also come with a network of contacts inside the customer's site who may be of great value to you in the sales process. This can prove useful as usually these employees can share with you who the influencers are and who the decision-maker is.

I have to give a warning here, sometimes the strategy of hiring ex-employees who used to work at your target customer's company may backfire on you. Especially if the person you've hired has left the company on bad terms and may have created enemies, which could complicate and reduce your chance of success in closing the deal.

Therefore, approach this strategy with care and verify the story that an ex-employee tells you about his exit out of the target companies and whether it was a peaceful exit or a hostile one.

Action Steps:

For your local team hire, which of the above recruitment methods will you use as your primary method when recruiting your team? Why did you pick that specific method over the others?

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How to Approach a Candidate

There are two ways to approach candidates:

1. Direct Approach:

You may choose to call the candidates, contact them through LinkedIn, or get introduced to them through a common contact or friend who knows the candidate.

In any way, you should have a written phone script that increases your chance of attracting the candidate to consider your offer and meet with you and explore the opportunity. Strong candidates who are professional at what they do, usually are very happy and comfortable in their current position. It would be best if you assumed that you are not the only person who has reached out to them with a job offer. Therefore, your approach should be attractive for them to explore.

My HR manager uses the following script in approaching candidates:

"Mr. Smith, I have been given your number by Mary Swanson, whom I have approached asking her to introduce me to the most professional person who can manage POCs. Without hesitation, Mary recommended you, indicating that you are probably the most professional and experienced person for the job and that I should not talk to anyone else but you.

Since you are very good at what you do, you are probably comfortable where you are, earning a good package with great benefits. I would certainly appreciate that you may not be looking at changing careers or moving companies at this time; however, Mary has recommended that we meet so I can share the opportunity at hand. She and I were hoping that you could guide me towards another highly-skilled candidate who may be interested in our attractive offer. Would you be available to meet this coming

Wednesday or Thursday? I am happy to come to a nearby restaurant during your lunch break, where I invite you for lunch and I share the opportunity. I would appreciate it, and Mary told me that you are a great person, and you are always there willing to help."

I love this script. I have yet to see it fail. It is incredibly useful in attracting even the most comfortable candidates. Using this script, you are not asking them to move or consider the opportunity; instead, you're asking them for help to find a potential candidate. Which most of the time, they would come to the meeting, listen to the offer, and indicate that they may be interested in this opportunity.

The other thing using this script achieves is that the referring friend has assured you that the candidate is a "great person who is always willing to help;" therefore, it makes it very hard for the candidate to refuse to meet because he or she does not want to prove the referring friend wrong.

The script also stimulates the mind of the candidate about their satisfaction level with their current job. The psychological aspect of the script pokes the candidate to revisit their current satisfaction level with their current job without putting any pressure on them to consider the option of changing jobs.

When you tell someone: "I am sure you are happy where you are, doing what you do with your current company. And I am confident that your employer is making sure someone with your qualification is very, very happy."

The natural internal dialogue this person would have as they hear you say the above sentence is, "Well, I don't know. Am I really happy with my current job? Are they paying me a great package? I don't think so. I am certainly worth a lot more. Also, I don't feel that appreciated here as I used to when I first joined. Maybe I should consider other opportunities. Why not!"

You are maybe wondering why my HR manager wrote the script that way. Why can't the script be just direct and state the real purpose of the call, which is for an interview? We were always taught to be straightforward. Why not this situation?

If the script were written differently, where you are telling that candidate that he may be unhappy with his current job, he would most likely disagree with you.

Their natural response would be, "Who said I'm unhappy? I'm very happy, and I am not looking to change my job." Human beings think and react in mysterious ways to questions and situations, and sometimes using opposite psychology works much better than getting right to the point.

2. Indirect Approach:

Instead of you contacting the candidate directly, sometimes it's better to ask someone else to make the call if you prefer to stay anonymous.

Now, whether you choose to use a common friend, a headhunter, or a recruitment agency to make the call, you should make sure to give the person a written script which will increase the chances of the candidate accepting to meet with you.

Remember, you are a professional who does not leave any detail to chance. So, it would be best if you did not leave the headhunter, the recruitment agency, or your common friend to figure out what to say on his own. Sometimes a single strategic hire can turn your company around and do wonders, so risking not getting an initial meeting with such a prominent candidate by not giving a script to the introducer is not a smart move. Please don't risk it. Please provide them with a script.

Action Steps:

1. For your local team hire, which of the above two approaches will you use for recruiting your team? Why did you choose that approach?

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2. Write a draft script for approaching candidates which will fit your business. Remember, it's a first draft, you will need to amend it after you test its effectiveness once you try it on a few candidates.

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How to Convince Candidates to Join You

There are three ways which you could convince a potential candidate to join you even if they are happy and comfortable where they are:

1. Find their unmet need:

Many candidates continue to work for an organization even though they are not satisfied. During the interview process, one of the most critical questions that an interviewer should ask: "What is your dream job?" or "What is your ultimate goal in life?" or "What is your dream profession even if you didn't get paid for it?"

You will be surprised to know that many people have entirely different dream professions than what they are currently doing. If you can get the candidate talking about how badly he wants to get a dream job, which could be a completely different job than what you are offering, then you would easily find their current unmet need with their current employer. And when you see the unmet need, you have found the key to the candidate's heart.

Then, your job as an interviewer is to show the candidate that by working in your company, you could help him achieve his dream profession by accelerating the time it will take him to reach his dream profession.

Happy employees achieve much bigger results than unhappy employees, so it is in your best interest to make sure that the candidate remains positive and happy while working for you, and continues to pursue his personal goals through your company.

You also have to make sure that they are happy working for you because they have a much bigger goal, which they are perusing while working with you.

There are very few organizations out there that promise their employees that they will work with them side-by-side for the employee to achieve a personal goal. Even though this may mean that this employee will only be staying with the company for a short period, this also means that the employee will use the company as a steppingstone before he leaves the job to pursue his unmet dream.

Smart companies recognize this need in key employees, and they make sure that it is not only the company's goal, which is important; it is also the employee's personal goals.

Many of our staff tell me that the main reason they joined our company is that they felt we were sincere about helping them achieve their personal goals in life.

Most likely, these same ambitious employees, after working with us for a few years, change their mind about pursuing their dreams; and they tell us that they are no longer interested in pursuing their dream job, and they prefer to continue to work with us because they are very happy doing what they're doing with us.

I advise you to sincerely implement a win/win strategy with all your employees, not only with candidates that you wish to hire but also for employees who are currently working for you. This strategy could be the greatest motivator for your team to perform at levels beyond your wildest expectations.

2. Sell them on your vision:

I have seen my HR managers use the company's vision as a tool to attract potential candidates to join the company, especially if the candidate's current employer’s vision is not motivating enough for the candidate to remain working there.

For this vision pull strategy to work, your vision has to be very compelling, attractive, vivid, realistic, and exciting for the candidate. You cannot attract employees to leave their current employer and join you if your vision is all about you, your financial targets, and your wants and needs. Your vision has to be much greater than making money. The reason behind the vision is fundamental to share with your candidate.

The American author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek, who I referred to earlier, advises us to always start with the "Why" before the "What" or the "How." He recommends that as a leader, you must explain to your people why you're doing what you're doing, and what impact it will have in the community or the world. This vision explanation should take the conversation to a completely different level, a much higher level than a job interview. When you share why you do what you do, and it has a compelling meaning and purpose behind it, people see the bigger picture. Your "Why," your vision, becomes a magnet that pulls them to want to become part of that big compelling vision, they want to play a role in making that vision a reality. The more exciting the vision and the journey towards the vision is, the more people will want to hop on board your ship and sail with you towards Treasure Island.

My question to you now is: Do you have an attractive and exciting vision? Is it attractive enough that it pulls potential candidates to your company? If not, you need to fix that very quickly. If you are serious about growing your company and attracting top talent, you need a pulling vision, crystal clear, and big enough to have an impact on the world.

3. Sell them on the performance:

Great high-performance people who are very good at what they do, are usually very confident in their ability to deliver the results. If you challenge such people on whether they can perform and walk their talk, often they are happy to accept the challenge and take a bet on themselves because they are confident in their ability to win the bet.

If you offer such confident people commission-only compensation, they will not hesitate to accept the offer, especially if the commission is much higher than average pay.

The commission-only compensation package works exceptionally well for financially-driven candidates, who are usually willing to accept the challenge and the opportunity of making a lot more money by receiving a very low salary plus a high commission on high-performance. This package is not only for salespeople, but it could be any job.

You can use this option with your salespeople who you wish to recruit for your company, but you can also use it for project managers and support managers and any other managers who their delivery of time and money is of the most importance to you.

Here is a script that my HR managers use in recruiting salespeople with low salary:

Mr. John, let me ask you a few questions:

- How satisfied are you with your current package?
- Do you aspire to achieve more?
- How confident are you in your ability to deliver the target which we have discussed?

If you are that confident in your target achievement abilities, then I am assuming that you are happy to bet on yourself and your ability to deliver beyond my expectations?

In that case, you should have no problem excepting a low salary with a high commission compensation package, which has no ceiling on the income that you can achieve. If you achieve the target, you will make double or triple your current pay package.

So, if you tell me that you are willing to bet on yourself, I would be happy to offer you a job right now with a low salary and a high commission. On the other hand, if you start giving me excuses about why the target is not achievable, then this will be the end of our interview. Simply because I can see that you have no confidence in your ability to deliver the target and if you don't trust your skills, why should I?

If the candidate has not lied in their interview about their credentials, the candidate would immediately ask about the salary and the commission structure. He would also ask about how much money he could earn if he delivers the target.

And, if the candidate is a fighter and confident in his abilities, he would refuse to end the interview; instead, he would try to negotiate and convince the interviewer to hire him. But if the opposite is true, then the candidate would immediately get up and leave indicating that he does not even have any negotiation or fighting spirit. In other words, he is a quitter. And the last thing you want in your sales team is a quitter.

I have never seen this hiring approach of high-performance people fail. A great salesperson knows that he can sell if the product is right. Just like a great sports player knows he can play well. A great performer, whether he performs well in sports, arts, or any other skill, is usually very confident of his ability to perform well since he has demonstrated to himself and others that he is very much capable of delivering.

If you are looking for high-performance people that are willing to bet on themselves by accepting a low salary and high commission, use the above scripts and notice how it transforms your team from low-performing job-security seekers to high-performing aggressive, hungry, hard-working professionals.

Action Steps:

1. For your local team hire, which of the above three methods will you use to convince a potential candidate to join you, even if they

are happy and comfortable where they are? Why did you choose that specific method(s)?

2. Write a draft script for convincing candidates to accept a low-salary/high-commissions compensation package. Remember, it's a first draft, you will need to amend it after you test its effectiveness once you try it on a few candidates.

Final Words of Wisdom

"Knowing is not enough. We must apply. Willing is not enough. We must do."

–Bruce Lee

Now that I have shared with you the 6-step system to fix the low sales problem which your business may be struggling with, you need to apply it. One of the first things I told you at the beginning of this book was that you wouldn't benefit much from this book, or other business books if you don't apply what you've learned. How else will you improve your business if you don't test the concepts, insights, and knowledge you learn?

If you need help in executing some or all of the ideas found in this book, contact my team or me. If we are overloaded and can't help you instantly, we will point you in the right direction where you can get help.

So, whether you need help with your business or not, write to me. I would love to hear about your business challenges and learn more about what you do. I am happy to share some of my experience in managing a large group of companies in 9 countries. And I am sure I will learn from your business experience as well. As a serial entrepreneur, you never stop learning. But again, knowledge is not enough; we need to put at least what we learn to practice.

If I don't hear from you, I hope our roads will cross one day at an event somewhere in the world, where I will hear you say to me, "Mr. Hisham, I have read your book, and I have used some of the advice you have shared, and it has made an impact on my business."

Hearing such a statement from a reader is worth all the time and effort I have invested in writing this book.

Go ahead and apply the **6 Ps System** to your business to win big deals with large organizations. It has done wonders for my sales team and many of our clients. It has helped one of my clients close a $365 million deal with a large contractor in Dubai. Will the system work for you? The best way to find out is to try it.

If you don't try, you won't fail, and if you are not failing enough, then you are not working hard enough, which means you are not growing.

I invite you on a journey of growth towards much bigger deals that will scale your company to higher targets, which you may have never thought possible. Use the **6 Ps System**, and make these new targets a reality waiting to happen for your company.

Good Luck.

Acknowledgment

Believe it or not, I have written the whole book using my smartphone. I spoke into my phone using a mobile application that converted my voice to text. I then downloaded it into my laptop and edited it. The 'writing' part took seven days, but the editing took months. I must say that the whole experience was much harder than I thought, yet more rewarding than I could have ever imagined.

None of this would have been possible without my team at SEED Group, from who I have learned so much throughout the past decades, especially Farah Batarneh, Patrick Osman, Normarie Jean Lacsamana, Ricahrd Galolo, Priscilla Camelia, Al Shaimaa Salah, and Umar Siddiq.

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To my father, who is my role model and inspiration in life. My mom, who is the wisest in my life who always guided me to do the right thing and think about people before business. To my wife, who supported me throughout my journey in life.

To my mentor, the late Jim Rohn, who I had the privilege of meeting in Dallas, Texas in 1995. Jim motivated me to never settle for less than what I deserve and work harder on myself than in my job. He started me on the journey of self-development, which helped me become the entrepreneur I am today.

About the Author

Hisham Algurg

A serial entrepreneur and investor with decades of experience in running small to large ventures in the MENA region and across the globe, Mr. Algurg is a pioneer in the MENA region for his visionary approach, high-profile networking, and for concluding and managing large regional projects, investments, and joint ventures worth billions of dollars.

He has been an investor, partner, and an advisor of members of the royal family of Dubai for decades, He also managed a large group of companies with tens of partnerships across the globe from the USA to Australia. He has invested in more than 70 companies from all around the world from different industries and sectors, especially in artificial intelligence, healthcare, technology, media, tourism, food & beverages, and retail.

Hisham holds a computer science bachelor's degree from Southwest Texas State University, and was awarded Entrepreneur of the Year in 2014. He is a distinguished graduate of the Prime Minister's Leadership program in Dubai.

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When I ask entrepreneurs and business owners about the reasons for their low sales, I hear the same excuses:

- *"I don't have enough salespeople."*
- *"My current sales force needs some serious sales training and coaching."*
- *"I am doing everything right. I don't know where the problem is. No one is buying. I can't figure it out."*
- *"My sales are dropping, my salespeople are frustrated, my customers are not referring more prospects to me, and I don't know what I'm doing wrong."*

If you think that by hiring better salespeople, training them well, and finding more customers is going to solve the problem of low sales due to selling a mediocre product, think again.

To succeed in closing big deals faster, you must have a great product, master the art of pitching it well, and allow your customer to try before they buy.

The book you hold in your hands will show you in 6 easy-to-follow practical steps how to never worry about low sales again, ever. I have used the same 6 Ps System to train all the sales teams in my 12 companies how to sell big-ticket products to customers from all around the globe. I designed the 6 Ps System 20 years ago, and my companies still use it today to sell high-ticket products and services to large multinational organizations, and it still works perfectly.

Most people don't lack knowledge of what they need to do, they lack practical action. And this book is not about sharing just the knowledge, but it will push you to act, so you can see immediate results in the way you sell.

Now, do you want to sit here and wonder whether these 6 Ps will work for you or do you want to see for yourself?

Get the book, read it, and most importantly, implement it.