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Original Manuscript

Overseas IT selling is a premeditated sport.

Overseas selling is a premeditated sport because as long as you follow all the rules of the sport and roll out your activities in a well thought out way; you are bound to be successful. Countless books / articles / interviews talk of strategies to market overseas or account management philosophies so I am going to spare you to agony of reading another such article.

What I thought I would focus on is providing insights into personal experiences into some areas that I believe are critical to being successful in playing and enjoying this wonderful challenging real life sport.

Business Plan

We all plan our businesses; especially overseas marketing activities. The only area where I believe we go wrong is when we plan only for the year ahead. I believe that any planning needs to be done for a minimum of three years. That this should be a micro level plan spelling out all areas including revenues, expenses, staffing plan, number of clients, infrastructure plan, etc. This is very important as this will give you a true picture of what your budgets are, what revenues you can expect, what pitfalls you can avoid and forecast etc. As they say – “The devil is in the details”.

Why I believe this helps is that this kind of plan helps you look ahead and see how today's actions / outcome will affect the plan 6, 12, 24, 36 months from now. I believe this it is imperative for today business owners to have a 36 month visibility.

An example of how this is panned out is, I closed two large overseas IT services deals last month. One was a multi-million multi-year deal and another was a very large 3 month deal. The day I closed these deals I know that my whole plan had changed. This is because the multi-million multi-year deal now gave me a huge safety net for a couple of years where I could safely take a few risks on the marketing activity, where as the 3 month large project needed me to staff up immediately without having any longitivity plan for the 40 odd people I bought on for that project.

Sales and Marketing:

Most Indian businesses selling overseas have all tried cold calling using a call center type concept and email marketing lashing out at any and every email address that they can get their hands on. Yet somehow I believe that these are hollow means of reaching out. This is from the perspective that no one bothers to check who the intended person is or how one can add value to a suspects business by offering your services.

I believe that the best way to do this is to actually do a thorough research on a target company , draw up a list (at least one) value adds that your company can offer, understand the suspects area of expertise, identify business problems that the suspect may be going through and then try and reach out to them by telling them what you can do to help them with their business problems. One thing to remember is that every business has problems. If you cant find any, you aren't looking hard enough !

Another important thing is to understand that nothing can replace face time with the prospect. There is no way that one can acquire a customer remotely. Please note that I said “acquire a customer” and not “get a project”. The difference being in acquiring a customer you get repeat business because the customer understands that you are willing to invest time to understand and then solve his business issues.

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I have acquired a lot of customers by first presenting to them what I believe they do, their pain points, how their industry is faring. This invariably puts a prospect at ease as they recognize that I have done my homework, even if I am a bit off on the facts.

Burning Dollars on the Road and ROI

One of the biggest concerns we have is of how much marketing dollars to burn before expecting results. I guess there is no magic formula for this. The important thing to remember is if you and the prospect do not “connect” within the first two hours of engagement; it would be difficult to acquire him as a customer. What I mean by “connect” is the ability of the prospect to gage your sincerity and interest in working with him.

For IT services I have made the below formula which I believe is fair returns a vendor can expect:

Initial order = 5 X Initial Marketing and Sales Investment
Second Order = 10 X Initial Marketing and Sales Investment
Third Order = 30 X Initial Marketing and Sales Investment

The formula usually works unless your prospect connects with you immediately and he immediately puts you onto a large opportunity.

Sports, Current affairs and Opinions

It is absolutely imperative to be up to date with the sports calendar and current events of the country you are selling into. One must take the trouble to not only understand the intricacies of the local sports but also who are the favorites and why. Also one must have opinions on current events happening in that country and internationally which are politically neutral and one must express them when asked. It becomes quite uncomfortable if you can't cook up a conversation outside business. And most importantly, please do not talk shop when you are out socializing. Unlike us they “work to live” and not visa versa!

Of course last but not least it is critical to be well dressed and groomed. Overseas clients give us business not only for our cost effectiveness but also because they are comfortable with the person they are dealing with. This means that while we are strategizing and presenting we must make this look good!

Happy Hunting!