The Art & Science of Big Deals: A Four-Part Strategy

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It's a comprehensive process to help you win high-value complex sales. Strategic Selling® shows you how to develop winning deal strategies, manage deal flow and forecast revenue by organizing your efforts to cover all the bases. It helps sellers shorten sales cycles and close business by leaving nothing to chance.

The Art & Science of Big Deals: A Four-Part Strategy

By Damon Jones

As every sales professional knows, "big deals" can determine the survival or demise of one's career. And every sales leader knows a big deal can promise huge revenue infusions that can make or break a quarter. Further, how you pursue and manage a big deal may well determine exactly how big it gets.

Big deals —your organization's most important transactions —are not only highly valuable, but highly complex as well. You're bouncing among several players at the customer company. Each has his or her own motives, goals and concerns; each has a different degree of influence over the ultimate purchasing decision. You may inadvertently find yourself tangled in their internal politics or tripped up by an emotional response. Or you may find late in the game that you've somehow managed to get that far without ever connecting with the real buyer or budget-owner.

That lack of information can have serious consequences, significantly delaying the sale —or scuttling it completely. When it comes to big deals, we lose because of what we don't know.

So how do you obtain that all-important knowledge, especially when the buying process and players differ dramatically from one organization to another? Through Strategic Selling®, a process Miller Heiman developed for teams to collaborate on complex opportunities and produce a customized winning strategy for each customer company —and each deal.

Big Deals vs. Large Accounts

In talking about big deals, it's helpful to begin by distinguishing them from another critical aspect of sales: large accounts. Essentially, we view big-deal management as managing opportunities, while large-account management is about managing relationships.

In managing a big deal, a sales team focuses on an opportunity with a defined timeline and a determined outcome, often in a highly competitive situation. You have a strategy for winning that deal or that contract. Depending on the industry, the timetable might run somewhere between three and twelve months.

With large account management, on the other hand, you've already won the business —in fact; the company in question is, by definition, among your best customers. You're trying to build on an existing relationship. Therefore, it has a much longer-term timeline, typically measured in years.

At many large organizations, there's little crossover between the big-deal and large-account teams because the two disciplines appeal to somewhat opposite personalities. The skills, attributes and motivations of people who are good at winning new contracts and developing new business are different from those who are good at building existing relationships.

Deal-makers tend to be "hunters" who thrive on competition, enjoy the thrill of the pursuit and love that either-or outcome: Either they close the deal or they don't.

Large-account managers, on the other hand, are more like farmers, who nurture and grow those existing relationships. They solve problems and even provide customer service. They're not in the full-out sales mode. That's not in their mindset.

Neither personality style is preferable; in fact, most successful sales organizations have a good mix of the two. Some are so well balanced that when new-business developers make big deals with companies likely to become major ongoing regular customers, they turn over management responsibility to large-account teams that are presumably better equipped to build and maintain long-term relationships.

Big Deals: A Four-Part Strategy

The strategic approach to pursuing big deals hinges on four factors:

- Intensive **preparation**
- Reaching the right **people**
- Pinpointing the source of **power**
- Working with an in-house **partner**

Preparation: "You really have to do your homework up front," says Tim Call, Miller Heiman's senior vice president of sales. "When you're dealing with these huge opportunities, the decision-makers don't want to have to deal with a salesperson who doesn't understand their business." Before you meet with prospects, he advises, learn about their companies by reviewing their Web sites and researching them through independent sources such as the Hoovers.com online business-intelligence database.

Successful preparation also requires a thorough understanding of both the prospect's problem and how your product or service will resolve it. "You need to know how well your solution fits the opportunity," Call says. "You need to get a very early indication of whether it's a good match and whether there are any issues you need to address to make it fit."

People: Getting those early warning signals depends on reaching the right people at the customer company, a task that's especially challenging. Initially, you need to make sure you're starting high enough up the ladder; typically, you're looking for people who are, at minimum, mid-manager level.

Next, it's important to get to everyone who —directly or indirectly —plays a role in the deal. Find out who all the people are who are going to influence the decision. What are their roles? Individual by individual, what's their level of influence? You need to bring that into full view to understand where you have strengths and where you have weaknesses.

Once you've identified those influential players, take nothing for granted when you approach them. For instance, make sure that everyone actually agrees on the need for a solution in the first place. If not —and if the skeptics' opinions carry any weight with their superiors —you'll need to invest some time winning them over before moving higher in the organization. Then, figure out how they feel about your solution, as opposed to the alternatives. Otherwise, you may be unpleasantly surprised when one or more of these key figures votes against your proposal, perhaps giving the business to one of your competitors.

Next comes the all-out push to persuade the key decision-makers. Make sure you have a strategy for connecting with them, getting in front of them and understanding what kind of results and personal wins they're looking for. Then make sure you're presenting an approach that meets their requirements. Again, the earlier you can get that kind of visibility, the better. Otherwise, you'll be wasting your time with the wrong people, or you won't be able to persuade them to buy.

Power: Many a big deal has gone awry because the sales side failed to find the one real power source. It can feel like you're dealing with a committee, and you probably are. But, even then, there's somebody chairing that committee or heading that project team. If people can't decide as a group, there's someone who makes that decision. And even when they do decide, there may be someone who ultimately approves what they've done.

That's the person you really need to convince —and that's a task more challenging than it may initially appear.

The power source (sometimes called the "economic buyer") may well be a senior executive to whom you, as an outsider, don't have direct access. In some cases, your mid-level contacts inside the company don't have, can't, or don't want to provide access, either. That leaves you in an awkward position if you can't close the deal without meeting that person. You may feel like you're going over their heads or making an end run around them to reach the economic buyer. You need to reach them in a way that doesn't disenfranchise them. There's a real art to that.

Conversely, some highly decentralized companies have multiple power sources. "A big complex organization might have three segments, each with its own vice president," Call notes. Depending on the corporate culture, you might direct your efforts toward the senior VP to whom those three VPs report —someone who's able to make decisions for the entire organization —or you might need to persuade each of the three executives individually.

Partner: The single best method for gathering the information on all those situations: Find a reliable partner *inside* the customer organization. Your partner —or as Miller Heiman dubs this person, your coach —should be someone knowledgeable both about the company's inner workings and about your solution and the alternatives. "A coach is someone who wants your solution, who finds you credible and who has credibility with the decision-makers," Call explains. "Coaches can help you get in the door and understand the lay of the land. It's hard to understand the environment in which you're working unless you have someone who's in it day in and day out and can tell you what's going on and why." A coach works on your behalf —not to do your selling for you, but to get the information you need to develop your strategy.

For instance, based on his or her inside knowledge, a coach can help you identify a company's true power source, then advise you on how to get around the mid-level roadblocks to reach that person. A coach might also advise you about, say, a dispute between two mid-level players —a situation that might prompt one party to torpedo your proposal simply because the other one supports it. "Sometimes even the key decision-maker may not know what's going on at a lower level," Call says. "With information from your coach, you can go in and bluntly say, 'This person over here seems to be sabotaging this effort, and you might want to consider whether that's in the best interests of your company.'"

A coach may be someone you know through a referral or your own previous contact with the company —or it may be someone you cultivate specifically to help you with a particular deal. But how do you gain support from a stranger —or even an existing acquaintance?

Start with a friendly sales call. Find and propose a benefit —a "win" —that a prospective coach can expect for cooperating with your efforts. It might be as simple as saying, "I need to meet some of your colleagues so I can put together a solution that's valuable for all of you, and I need your help to do that." Or it might involve finding a way to help the coach shine in front of his or her boss in exchange for providing you with insights and assistance in reaching the right people.

"Coaches can make you look so smart," Call says, citing one who provided him with a wealth of background that he used to craft a highly targeted training-solution proposal. "He told me all about training at his company so that I could think about their approach and how to weave our solution into what they were already doing." In fact, Call says, applying that kind of insider information "is one of the cornerstones of strategic selling."

When a Big Deal Takes a Big Dive

Sometimes even when it seems that you've done everything right, a big deal falls through. But that doesn't mean the sales process is over. You may have lost that battle, but the war is still on.

In such instances, the best sales teams undertake thorough reviews to figure out what went wrong. Good organizations will always dissect a failed deal in the same way that they researched it when they were trying to win it.

Of course, it's always possible that a deal failed because a decision-maker concluded that your product doesn't fit or your price is too high. But it's far more likely that, somewhere along the way, the initiative went off track —possibly because of a glitch that might have been prevented by following the strategic-selling approach that Miller Heiman advocates. For example, maybe you didn't do a good job of communicating the value proposition to the right people. Or maybe you didn't connect with the right people at the right decision points in the process.

In making those determinations, though, it's important to avoid creating an atmosphere of criticism and blame. You don't want to feel like you're throwing any individual person under the bus. The environment should be "We're not going to win them all. Let's debrief. Let's go back through it and see where we felt we were doing well and where our weaknesses were." Together, team members can decide what they'll do differently in the future. Meanwhile, if individual salespeople clearly need additional guidance or training, their managers should work that out with them privately.

Ultimately, the best way to find out why a big deal flopped may be to go straight to the source. Speak to the customer. Get some feedback so that you can learn from that. And reaching out that way may generate longer-term benefits as well: It shows that you care. It shows that you want to learn. And that's important because —who knows? —you might work with that company again in the future.

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The Sales Performance Company

About Miller Heiman

Miller Heiman has been a thought leader and innovator in the sales arena for almost thirty years, helping clients worldwide win high-value complex deals, protect and grow key accounts, manage talent and optimize sales strategies and operations.

With a prestigious client list that includes Fortune 500 clients, Miller Heiman helps companies in virtually every major industry to build high performance sales teams that deliver consistent sustainable results to drive revenue.

The company is headquartered in Reno, Nevada, and has offices around the world. More information can be obtained by calling 877-552-1747.

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