

Getting Inside the Black Box: Harsh Realities of Selling to a Committee

By Thomas Williams & Tom Saine



“Committees” are the mysterious black boxes of the sales universe. Sellers often assume they know what’s inside the box only to find that it was not at all what they suspected. The word “committee” is often used to cloak a buying process in secrecy. One individual’s “committee” is another’s team or group. When executives are questioned about how they are going to render a buying decision you may hear some of the following organizational double-speak.

- “I’m going to have a group of department heads take a look at our options.”
- “I’ve got a team of users that will guide us.”
- “When we get to that point, I’ll bring together a project team.”
- “I’ll start with procurement and then get feedback from department heads before getting the final ‘ok’ from Finance.”

Are any of these comments helpful in defining a committee’s role involvement in the buying process? The responses are so vague that it’s difficult to know whether this is an *ad hoc* group or a formal committee or simply a list of people who must “sign off” on a decision before a purchase is authorized.

Many committees are a formal part of the organizational structure. They may work under such titles as Quality Assurance Team, Buying Committee, New Product Committee, Technology

Selection Committee and others. Committees may be charged with one or several of the following objectives:

- To reduce the risk factors associated with making a decision;
- To increase collaboration and buy-in from various organizational groups;
- To ensure compliance with governmental or industry regulations; and
- To mobilize internal support that would ease and speed implementation.

Understanding the Seller's Challenge

Selling to a committee may present several challenges to the sales professional.

- Sellers may be faced with selling to many individuals who hold diverse opinions and needs that may conflict with others.
- Committee members often act differently in a group than when they are approached individually.
- Committee meetings are often influenced by internal political issues that have little to do with the seller's product.
- Trying to make the meeting or presentation relevant for each individual or reach a collective "yes" can be difficult for someone outside the buying organization unless they have strong coaching and guidance.

Five Harsh Realities of Selling to Committees



- All committee members are not equal. It would be a mistake to assume that all parties get to vote or have equal say in the buying process. Some committee members may be included for a relatively specific function such as explaining test results or legal terminology.
- Information is not always shared. Some members may hoard relevant information or distribute data at the last minute for political reasons.
- Different committees employ different decision processes. Some may decide by vote; others may require a consensus or formal "sign off" before authorizing a purchase.

- Committee members may not share a common sense of urgency in completing the buying process.
- The easiest decision for a committee to make is to “do nothing.” It requires the least effort and (many times) involves the least risk.

Getting Inside the Black Box



Committees are comprised of a number of people within an organization. In some situations, committee members can be included from outside the organization. A Governing Board for a not-for-profit hospital in a

local community is a good example. Each member of the committee has a different title, area of focus, business and personal objectives, personality and preferences. People often act much differently in a committee than they do when meeting with sales professional individually. Within a group the leader or one influential person can change the dynamics quickly and unexpectedly. One person with specific expertise i.e. legal can shift positions quickly.

Before engaging a committee, the seller may find it helpful to conduct a discovery process that answers many of the following questions. Sellers may not always get the answers but the discovery process can be invaluable in building a strong sales strategy.

Committee Composition & Size

- How many people are on the committee?
- What are the names and titles of the individuals that serve on the committee by function i.e. department, area of focus etc.?
- Who does the committee report to within the organization?
- What are the requirements to be on the committee?
- Who created the committee and assigned its members?
- Who is the chairperson of the committee? How long has this person been the chair?
- Who are the most vocal or influential members of the committee?
- Are there any sub-committees within the committee? If yes, what are their names, how many people serve on them and who serves on them (name and title)?

Committee Meeting Frequency:

- How often does the committee meet?
- Does the committee publish a meeting calendar for the year?
- Where within the facility does the committee meet?
- Are the committee meetings open or closed to suppliers?
- Does the committee publish minutes of their meeting? Are the committee minutes confidential?
- Does every committee member attend each meeting?

Committee Charter:

- How was the committee's charter created?
- What information can the seller provide to the committee that would be of value?
- What are the committee's mandates or priorities?
- Are there other committees or members that the seller needs to address?
- How long has the committee been in existence?

Committee Process:

- What issues are most important to the committee?
- Is there a deadline?
- Will the committee use a scorecard or formula for comparing solutions?
- Do any of the committee members have an opinion on the seller's product service or solution, versus a competitor and the status quo?
- Besides the seller, what other solution is the committee considering? Is status quo an option?
- Does the committee allow suppliers to present to the committee? If yes, how much time is allocated?

Committee Authority & Decision Dynamic:

- How does the committee make a decision?
- Are the decisions of the committee based on quality, price and/or other factors?
- What are the decision criteria and weighting that the committee uses to assist in a decision?
- What is the weight of each vote on the committee?
- What is the voting process?
- Is the decision the committee makes binding and final?
- How often does the committee vote yes, for a new product/service and it does not get implemented?
- What company has been most successful with the committee?
- What specific metrics does the committee look for from each vendor?
- Once the committee makes a decision what happens next?
- Do all of the members of the committee have an equal vote?
- If 100% of the committee members do not agree how is a decision made?
- If the committee vote is split 60-40 for the change, is the committee committed to the change?

Parting Thoughts & Key Takeaways

There are several key takeaways for sellers to consider in building an effective sales strategy.

- Committees are now an integral part of the buying process and they are not easily circumvented.
- Selling to a committee is distinctly different than selling to several diverse stakeholders as part of the buying process.

- Committees are formed to reduce the risk factors by involving more people in the selection equation. Much of the committee discussion may focus on identifying sources of risk and systems for mitigating risk
- Savvy sales representatives spend significant time learning about the various buying committees and asking questions to improve their understanding of how culture and political influence decision-making.

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