



## The Key to Major Account Sales: Take Your Medicine

*Metaphors.* They hold real value in helping us understand the world. So...when it comes to the world of major account sales, it may be valuable to consider the metaphor of the family physician. But first, let's back up a bit.

In today's increasingly competitive global marketplace, customer bases are shrinking; amalgamation and acquisitions are taking over. Virtually every supplier is vying for the same large customers. As a result, the age of the major account sales team (often called National Accounts) is in full swing. Add to this challenge, the fact that buyers are getting more knowledgeable and demanding.

In response to such changes, major account salespeople strive to be *consultants* to their customers, offering increasing levels of *value* as illustrated in *The Value Pyramid* below.

How can we climb the Value Pyramid and get key account customers to open their minds and doors to long-term strategic relationships? The answer may lie in the prescribed metaphor (pun intended): maybe we can learn something from our family physicians.

Consider the last time you visited your family doctor. How much time did the physician spend "diagnosing" versus "prescribing?" The ratio is likely at least 80:20, if not 90:10. However, when it comes to sales professionals,

ample research shows the ratio is often reversed.

Consider for a moment that your major customers are trying to render your products and services mere commodities by focusing discussions on price. Clearly, the only way to combat such efforts is to offer consultative advice beyond the products and services themselves. In order to accomplish this, we must become literal *experts* in our customer's business and industry. This requires more sophisticated "diagnosing" or investigation than the simple question-asking employed by most sales professionals.

**Consultative investigation** involves asking a comprehensive series of questions of the various decision influencers in a key account, in a manner that demonstrates your credibility, differentiates you from the competition, and informs you about the customer's business.

So, how do we diagnose the best ways to help customers improve strategy and their bottom line?

The *5 C's of Consultative Investigation* questioning strategy will help (see sidebar). By applying this model diligently, and fully exploring each stage with the customer, you will most certainly uncover more sales opportunities and differentiate yourself from the competition.

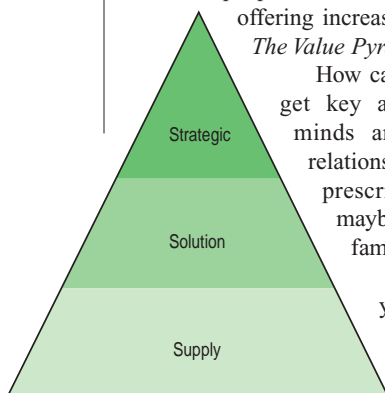
Another consultative investigation approach, known as *Universal Question Asking*, calls upon "The Five W's and an H" (see sidebar). Simply put, it involves asking specific questions

to gain a thorough understanding of the customer's business.

It's safe to say that if we govern ourselves more like our family physicians — and spend 80% of our time diagnosing, rather than prescribing — we're bound to improve success in our major account selling efforts.

If you want to learn more about climbing the *Value Pyramid* in major account sales, stay tuned for the CPSA's new program *Strategic Account Management*. Additional topics to be covered include negotiation skills, strategic territory planning, and advanced business development and account management strategy. Check out the CPSA's website for more information. **C**

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Value Sought By Customers

### 5 C's Consultative Investigation:

#### Circumstance

General, broad, open questions designed to learn about the customer's business and seek out areas of pain or opportunity.

#### Challenge

A blend of open and closed questions that narrow the discussion towards a comprehensive exploration of a specific business challenge/need the customer possesses.

#### Consequence

An inquisitive dialogue exploring the importance of the uncovered issue, the other organizational factors around it, and the positive and negative consequences of addressing or not addressing that issue. Specific attention is paid to the strategic and bottom-line impact of the issue.

#### Collaboration

A series of investigative questions that explore the viability of possible solutions, especially those related to your products and services. Specific attention is paid to the potential ROI of the various solutions.

#### Commitment

The close. These questions facilitate securing the client's commitment to the best, mutually rewarding solution uncovered.

#### Universal Question Asking

("The Five W's and an H")

Who	Who are your customer's customers?
What	What do they buy?
Where	Where do they buy it and use it?
When	When do they tend to buy?
Why	Why do they buy from your customer (or another supplier)?
How	How do they use what they buy (and How does your customer make a profit from that purchase)?