

What CIOs Want To Hear In A Vendor's Sales Pitch



PITCH

by Mark Settle

Many if not most IT leaders are subjected to two or three vendor pitches per month. Gluttons for punishment may receive many more.

By the time a newly minted CIO celebrates their third anniversary on the job, they've typically received 50-100 sales presentations and have likely developed pronounced preferences about the information they're hoping to obtain through such encounters. Unfortunately, their desires are rarely met.

While there's no standard formula for an effective sales pitch, conversations with many CIOs and my own personal experience leads me to believe that the majority of IT leaders are seeking answers to the following questions when they agree to meet with a vendor's sales team.

Who are you guys and how did you get here?

If I've had no prior exposure to a prospective vendor, the sales team should provide a thumbnail sketch of the size and maturity of their company in terms of employees, customers, revenue and venture capital funding, if applicable. Exhaustive descriptions of the professional backgrounds of the vendor's executive team are unnecessary. Prior contacts and conversations with members of my IT team should be explicitly noted.

What problem are you trying to solve?

Please don't patronize me by describing industry trends that I'm personally experiencing every day. I know that ransomware attacks are increasing, that we're spending too much on cloud computing services and that SaaS adoption creates a variety of administrative and security headaches.

I don't need a history lesson in how a specific problem was created. I lived through that history and may have made decisions that contributed to the creation of the problem in the first place! The vendor should describe the benefits – business or technical – that their product delivers in simple, general terms.

Where do you fit in the universe of IT vendors?

Many sales pitches are bizarrely similar to the *Wheel of Fortune* game show. The vendor reveals piecemeal information regarding their technical capabilities, the experiences of their customers and the capabilities of other vendors that may complement or compete with their product. So, like a *Wheel of Fortune* contestant, I'm expected to piece these clues together to determine the vendor's true competitors.

Wouldn't it be simpler to identify competitors explicitly or just tell me the Magic Quadrant domain that Gartner would use to assess your capabilities, whether you're currently rated by Gartner or not? Extra credit tip: it's also helpful to categorically state *what you are not* (e.g. 'we are not an SIEM or DLP solution').

In rare cases a vendor may be pitching a product that doesn't fit into a conventional solution category. In these instances the vendor not only has to create a product but also create a market for their product. If that's the case – if the vendor is building a market and a product at the same time – then they should just simply say so.

How does your product actually work?

Senior IT leaders spend more time on budgeting, staffing and political issues than keeping up with recent advances in artificial intelligence or blockchain technology so they don't need detailed technical descriptions of a vendor's product. What does interest them in how a particular vendor's solution differs from alternative products offered by their competitors.

Vendors should describe the 'secret sauce' that differentiates their product in general terms that can be digested by a semi-technical audience. They'll have an opportunity to demonstrate their technical wizardry in front of my technical team if we elect to continue the conversation.

What are the 2-3 most common ways your customers are using your product?

If I want to build a business case for procuring your product, I need more than just a general statement of the problems you solve. I need 2-3 quantifiable use cases that would justify a potential purchase. A vendor should be able to cite such use cases based upon the experiences of their current customers. The number of vendors who are unable to provide quantifiable use cases is sometimes shocking.

Wait for it.....here's the money question: what can I get rid of if I purchase your product?

Prospective buyers are generally quite willing to describe the products they're currently using to address the problem that the vendor claims to solve. They typically share such information to obtain insight into what's different and better about the vendor's solution. This type of comparison, however, also begs the question: 'can I underwrite the purchase of your product with the savings I'll achieve by eliminating other solutions that I'm currently using?'

Leaders understand that it's difficult to swap technical solutions overnight and aren't expecting to turn off an existing tool on the first day that a new product is implemented. However, they would like some form of reassurance that they're simplifying or rationalizing their existing tech stack rather than simply adding to it.

Extra credit questions, but please wait to be asked

IT leaders tend to be a little more farsighted than some of their more technically focused team members. Consequently, vendors should be prepared to answer questions regarding implementation timelines and change management issues associated with the use of their product.

Leaders may inquire about long term staffing requirements or new operational procedures required to support their product. They may wonder if the vendor's solution will enable them to obtain greater benefits from other tools they already own. They may also ask for references to existing customers of similar size that have comparable business models or operations.

Vendors should be prepared to answer any and all of these questions but should wait until they are asked. If the vendor hasn't addressed the preceding six questions satisfactorily, none of these extra credit questions really matter.

This really isn't rocket science!

The irony of the customer courtship process is that questions listed above seem so obvious to IT leaders and yet so challenging to vendor sales teams.

Vendors frequently spend way too much time describing the qualifications of their leadership teams or explaining the technical inner workings of their products. They're reluctant to identify competitors which creates unnecessary ambiguity and misperceptions about their technical capabilities. And they routinely sidestep questions about displacing incumbent solutions out of fear of offending individuals who purchased, implemented and currently maintain those solutions.

Finally, sales pitches should not be allowed to degenerate into Powerpoint monologues or one-sided vendor interrogations. The most effective pitches are two-sided conversations.

Clever sales representatives should use each of the questions listed above as a pretext to learn more about a prospective customer. The best pitch is one in which air time is equally shared between seller and buyer and the vendor's sales team comes away from the encounter learning as much about the customer as the customer has learned about them.

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