

"We are the champions - my friends..." (Freddie Mercury, 1977)

What has this 1977 international hit, from Queen's 'News of the World' album (and since adopted as a sporting anthem), got to do with selling?

Well, the topic set for the author of this month's Insight is 'competitive advantage' and a vital contributor to achieving it is having effective champions. A champion is someone within the buying organisation who favours your solution over those of your competitors and who is prepared to advocate it **actively** to decision makers. In other words, a champion sells on your behalf. They are vital for a number of reasons.

Major sales cycles take time – months, or years in some cases – and sellers may have at best only a few hours face-to-face contact with decision makers. Champions are there to sell when you're not.

Sellers often cannot gain access to all the decision makers; they might be too senior or too busy. An effective champion can get in front of the people you cannot and influence them for you.

Champions can be your eyes and ears on the ground, alerting you to competitive activity and developing joint strategies with you to combat it.

Recruiting, training and rehearsing good champions are therefore essential skills for the effective major account seller. So here's a tip on each.

Tip No 1: Recruiting

If you're lucky, you'll find a champion in the senior buying team, but more commonly candidates will lie further down their organisation with the ability only to influence rather than to decide. Often they will be potential users of your solution, or they will be suffering deeply as a result of whatever problems it will resolve.

To recruit them, develop a wide range of needs, **especially personal ones**. Focus your efforts on those that play to your key differentiators – those things you can do better than your competitors.

Tip No 2: Training

Competition can come in many forms, not just the other usual suspects in your marketplace. There's the 'do-it-yourself' option, where an internal department feels it can provide a solution that's equal or even superior to yours.

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Often forgotten is the competition for funds, the 'do-something-else' option, where the buying organisation decides that time and money put to use in a wholly different area will provide a better return on the investment. And in hard times, the 'do-nothing' option has its obvious attractions.

Train your champion to be on the lookout for signs of these less obvious types of competition and not to feel awkward about reporting them to you. Otherwise, the sale might just disappear.

Tip No 3: Rehearsing

Rehearsing a champion to sell for you at crucial points in the sale is perhaps the most difficult skill of all. Too often sellers **tell** the champion what to say: "When you see Ashish, don't forget to remind him about our...", or "Make sure the Board know of our capabilities in...". The result is that the champion comes over as unconvincing and unpersuasive – speaking your words not their own, and listing Features and Advantages.

A far better rehearsal strategy is to **ask** – use questions to help your champion recall and develop their own words to describe the needs that your solution will meet and the value that it will deliver.

If you want some of our other insights into how to develop competitive advantage, [click here](#). It's not easy, but we've had years of experience of helping people adopt changes in behaviour that change results. Anyway, as Freddie goes on to tell us:

*"But it's been no bed of roses,
No pleasure cruise.
I consider it a challenge before the whole human race
And I aint gonna lose."*

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