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Your CEO Called About CRM: Now What?

– David Taber, CIO

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The CEO has called and asked for some training on the CRM system. A great opportunity...but there are a hundred things you could train him on. Where do you start, and where do you place your bets?

CEOs are smart in both IQ and EQ, but they're also really busy. They simply don't have the time for lengthy training sessions, and they certainly won't stick around long enough to be indoctrinated. Tons of business-school research indicates that a CEO will almost never give you more than 5 minutes of undivided attention — so you must earn the right to talk for anything more than that.

So how are you supposed to communicate anything of value about CRM systems in the time of a commercial break?

Start with What the CEO Thinks is Important

Different companies have different operational priorities — it depends on your company size, age, industry, and other factors. But any CEO has an internal priority list — revenue growth may be more important than immediate profitability, or manufacturing may be more important than customer service. Job one is to figure out the four or five top things on the CEO's mind, and deliver actionable information for at least one of them. A good place to start is the measurements the Board has in place for the CEO.

Let's suppose your CEO really values customer retention. A good topic, then, is measuring repeat business along the lines of revenue, profitability, and customer "churn." The CRM functionality you'd want to show would illustrate trends in customer retention, and highlights winning vs losing sales strategies.

Develop an Opening Gambit

Given the limited time you have to make an impression — and to get permission to go longer than 5 minutes — it's important to start with a grabber. Starting with architecture or first-principles arguments is pretty likely to the CEO and will waste your opportunity.

I like starting with a question or a business puzzle, something that invites curiosity and an open-ended conversation. The opening gambit could be something like: "with customer satisfaction at 95%, how come our XYZ line gets only 20% repeat business?" Developing an opening gambit of that sophistication will take some work (off to the data warehouse!), but a good gambit allows you to illustrate the power and business value of a solid CRM system.

For most CEOs, revenue is a lot more interesting than cost...so bias your selection of opening gambits to things that effect this quarter's sales results. If you don't have enough data to focus on the revenue

pipeline, at least bring in revenue proxies like "new customers" or "sales inquiries."

Keep it Bite Sized

The best outcome for you is not a long sit-down meeting. If you can have a 20 minute session that the CEO actually remembers, terrific...particularly if she's actually asking for a follow-up session. One of the tricks I use is to create a personalized feature that answers a very specific CEO question in a simple, usable way.

If you possibly can, have four or five of these goodies at the ready, so you can deliver information and functionality in bite-sized chunks. What you don't want to do is deliver them all at once: less is more. Keep some dry powder, and have a planned sequence of "bright shiny objects" for the boss.

Beware Dangerous Sizzle

It's tempting to focus your opening gambit on some piece of CRM tech that gives great demo, but involves risk (either of uncertain results or of losing control of the conversation). Let's look at some examples of dangerous sizzle:

- *Dashboards would seem a natural for showing off to the CEO:* they're the top-down view of key success factors in the business, right? Problem is, dashboards are dependent on correctly constructed reports (particularly the filters and joins), and it's all too easy to show some report that leads to bogus conclusions. Perhaps more importantly, dashboards expose (or even magnify) problems with data quality and semantics. If your data has dupes, dashboards will show double-counting. If the data is incomplete (or has blurry semantics), the dashboards will show holes.
- *Mobile apps certainly check the "sizzle" box, but they can only look as good as the platform they are on.* While an iPhone mobile CRM app usually looks great, if your corporate standard is Windows Mobile, the story won't be so pretty. There's an additional twist: as most serious mobile CRM apps involve extra charges per user, they risk some optics that backfire.
- *The Latest Greatest CRM Features also check the box for sizzle, but they can be high risk territory.* The slickest demo of cool Social CRM goodies can be beautiful, until you discover that the demo shows stuff that isn't really part of the product. Setting expectations around something cool that actually requires a \$100K consulting engagement in order to work is not likely your best move.

The key to an effective CRM training session for CEOs is to keep it at a high enough level that the conversation is around business value and board-level topics. Anything you talk about in the training session must be bullet-proof (and idiot proof) — so you need to do some homework and careful orchestration.

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