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## Difficult customers, difficult times

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## STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS

### Trust builder or buster?



By Steve Andersen

While working recently with a news broadcast playing in the background, I decided to run a little experiment: Let's see how many items are reported that suggest a potential violation of trust or possible compromise of integrity. I defined these either in the form of acts of commission (the violating party knew exactly what it was doing, and if it's sorry, then only

because it was caught) or acts of omission (the party apparently didn't know any better, or at least that's its story). The longer my experiment went on, the more interesting it became: My list of potential violations grew and grew. And to ensure I wasn't slanted or biased by one "version of the truth," I decided to use my remote and sample several news outlets. You might want to try this experiment yourself, but if your results are similar to mine, then potential violators may be found in all the following communities: business, finance, government, politics, education, technology, sports, transportation, food/beverage and the media itself, among others.

Maybe things aren't so different today than in the past and the reason we seem to hear more of this type of bad news is that it is reported more readily and thoroughly. Maybe we "didn't know what we didn't know" in previous decades, so we shouldn't overreact to what sometimes appears to be an outbreak of these trustbusters in everyday life. We can always elect to take the ethics high road and tell ourselves that while we can't change the world, at least we can avoid these types of problems ourselves.


But then I start to think about the common thread that connects all SAMA members, on both the supplier and customer side: a keen interest in the dynamics between authentic, strategic customer-supplier relationships. And then I begin to think like a customer (this is a technique we employ in our strategic account management workshops—it can be quite insightful!) and how customers must feel today. They're attempting to cope with their drivers and achieve business objectives while battling a host of problems and challenges to success (and even survival). They're listening to the news in the background, too, and probably asking themselves, "Who can I trust?"

I recall a comment made deliberately in my presence early in my sales career. "You can't trust a salesperson," the individual remarked, glancing at me to test my reaction. I didn't react, but this kind of thinking bothered me then and bothers me now. My work over the past 30 years with salespeople has left me with the impression that some of the most professional, ethical and

trustworthy people in business are involved in sales, account management and sales leadership/management. These are people who develop customer relationships based on transparency and authenticity and always strive to do the right thing for the customer. These people understand intrinsically that while it may take years for a supplier to become a trusted partner or adviser to the customer, these relationships can be reduced to sub-vendor level in a matter of moments.

Customer trust must be earned by the supplier, and I believe that today, perhaps more than ever, the strategic account manager is in an ideal position to be his customer's first line of trust. In stark contrast to the uncomfortable comment above that I overheard years ago, the SAM *must* be trusted by his customer lest the relationship become inauthentic and certainly not strategic in nature. But if you talk to enough customers out there now, you quickly get the feeling they're tired of being told they're strategic just for them to find out they are only as strategic as the size and timing of the next sale they provide. Top-performing SAMs we work with deploy a variety of innovative best practices to build trust-based relationships with customers, including (in the words of the SAMs themselves):

- "I go the distance for my customer. I'm willing to be there for them even when I don't have to be."
- "I engage with my customer *their way*."
- "I don't close deals; I open relationships!"
- "I am my customer's ambassador to my company."
- "I refuse to 'act like a salesperson' with my strategic customer."
- "I always ask my customers how they define success, and then I focus my account management efforts accordingly."
- "I try to 'get it right the first time' for my customer."
- "I make it my business to know what my customer values most."

At Performance Methods Inc. we're in a position every day to see the results of the trust-building best practices of top-performing SAMs. It never ceases to amaze me when a customer who spends tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars with a supplier first mentions her account manager when I ask her to describe the value of her relationship with the supplier. And we never hear this when there is an absence of trust in the relationship. Maybe this is what every account manager should aspire to be today: a dedicated customer trust builder in a world of inauthentic trustbusters. 

Steve Andersen will give a presentation about effective strategic account planning at SAMAs 45th Annual Conference in May in Hollywood, Fla. He is president of the consultancy Performance Methods Inc. ([www.performancemethods.com](http://www.performancemethods.com)) and can be reached at [sandersen@performancemethods.com](mailto:sandersen@performancemethods.com) or (770) 777-6611.