

Perspective on Marketing and Selling to CIOs: Interview with an Experienced CIO

 walkersands.com/about/blog/perspective-on-marketing-and-selling-to-cios

Patrick Daley

September 9, 2015



I recently connected with Pierre-Albert Carlier, an experienced and accomplished global CIO and consultant, to discuss the fine art of marketing and selling to CIOs.

Pierre-Albert served as the Chief information Officer at Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH), for their global watches and jewelry business. He has been a CIO for more than 20 years, and now works as an independent consultant (his website is MonCIO.com).

In his independent consulting practice, he continues to consult with LVMH and other firms on IT and strategy matters, but another fast-growing part of his practice focuses on advising IT product and service providers on their marketing and sales strategies.

I was very interested to get his perspective on CIO engagement not only because he has been marketed to and sold to by many vendors while he was a CIO but also because he now advises many companies on how to approach selling IT solutions.

Here is my interview with Pierre-Albert. It contains some helpful information for anyone who is interested in improving the way they approach CIOs in the pursuit of enterprise technology sales.

Pierre-Albert, thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. I understand that you have worked as a CIO and now have a fast-growing consulting practice.

I am sure that, as a CIO at LVMH, you were approached by many salespeople offering you their products or services. How would you describe the attributes of those who were successful in getting time with you and ultimately winning your business? What did they do to earn your trust and your business?

CIOs have many, many, operational issues daily. As such, it is critically important that a salesperson should not be an additional issue for the CIO. Rather, they must be a solution to one of the CIO's issues.

So, the very first thing a person who is trying to sell to a CIO should do is solve one of the CIO's problems.

You are always grateful to someone who removes a stone from your shoe.

I have vivid examples of vendor representatives sharing a bright idea with me that had nothing to do with what their company was selling.

As a CIO, you will always be pleased with those people. And, one day, you will buy from them.

I am guessing that some salespeople did not get very far with you. What are the biggest mistakes you think people make when they are selling to CIOs? What is it about the psychology of the CIO that many people do not fully understand?

When selling to CIOs, the list of errors is endless. The sales mistakes that I see most often are:

- **Not knowing the business context.** Many sales reps start with talking and selling instead of listening and asking questions. That's a big mistake. To understand my needs, spend 15 minutes with me, asking me about my operation. Allow me to explain how the Group is structured, what the Governance is, how our purchases are managed, and what our products, customers and sales channels are.
- **Not understanding the real priorities of the CIO.** The CIO's priorities should inform your sales process. For example, my priority may be cutting operating expenditures by 20% before month end. How would that change your sales approach? Surprisingly, many who sell to CIOs don't bother to acquire even this baseline understanding of CIO needs.
- **Not considering IT lifecycles.** Many vendors try to sell an additional product without explaining what it will allow the IT group to decommission.
- **Nothing actionable.** I have met with sales reps who don't bring anything that is actionable, whatever the context. This type of meeting wastes my time and wastes the vendor's time. It is usually the last meeting I will take with the vendor.
- **Not understanding the CIO's relationships.** Those who sell to CIOs should understand the relational context of a CIO and how he or she interacts with other executives and organizational centers of decision-making. They need to help the CIO to navigate that organizational structure successfully. In my experience, very few who earn a living selling to CIOs actually do that.

Interesting. Now, I've heard some people say that it is smarter to sell to the people who work for the CIO because they vet the products. Their contention is that the CIO is just signing the contracts and approving the budget expenditure but isn't involved in deciding which provider to use. Do you agree with that? What types of products or solutions should be sold to the CIO and which types should instead be sold to the Office of the CIO?

It might be true for commodity products, but overall I disagree with this assertion.

It is true that the CIO loves having his or her reliable managers give a thoughtful and comprehensive pros and cons analysis on vendor and platform selection.

But the n-1 people will never have the global picture that the CIO has. They will never understand the risks that are or not acceptable. They will not know the power map (the relationship between people and their diverse levers).

For instance, buying from a supplier that can talk directly to your CEO is often a criteria for purchase. If the CIO doesn't think the supplier will perform well in front of the CEO, then the CIO may opt to go with a different supplier. This sort of information is not part of the typical evaluation done by a CIO's direct reports.

On the flip side of CEO access, buying from a supplier where you have reliable and direct access to the CEO is often key. If I am the CIO, I often will need to know that my vendor's CEO is available and accessible if and when I need access. Again, IT managers involved with a purchase may not know the level of trust that is needed.

I have seen organizations with very strict rules on purchases where you have to define in every detail what is purchased, how much it costs, etc. When a problem arises it is then technically managed within those boundaries. This is often a huge limitation to creativity.

The reality is that the capability to find and implement a strong solution to a problem cannot be automated or proceduralized. It requires a level of skill and experience that is often found only at the CIO level.

If CIOs are not involved in the choice and final decision, they cut themselves off from these options and put the organization at risk. I shall never do it.

That makes sense, especially for IT purchases that are strategic or risky. Switching gears a little bit, what about marketing to CIOs? If I am marketing a technology or business solution, where are the CIOs at? How can I best get my marketing messages in front of them?

If you are marketing a technology or a solution to a CIO, then your key underlying messages should be:

- My solution will enhance your market visibility or your in-house visibility, or both;
- My solution will positively change the perceptions that people are having about you;
- My solution will allow you to interact directly with Mr. or Mrs. So and So, with the board of this subsidiary, for example, or with some other micro or macro audience that is important; and

- My solution will help you to achieve a specific objective that you've told me (or I know through persona work and market research) is important to you, professional or otherwise.

Many marketers of technology solutions and services don't seem to understand the importance of these fundamental messages.

In most cases, well-known solutions will do the job because a CIO trusts the market to a great extent, as many of us do. This makes it difficult for new entrants and those who are not in first place. But if Marketing can showcase the key differentiators from the competition and explain how a given solution and its points of differentiation will serve the objectives of the CIO, you can get the lead and ultimately get the sale.

That's very helpful advice. You've been very generous with your time and I appreciate it. Why don't you share a little bit about your consulting practice, as I'm sure there are a number of companies out there who might be interested in your services. How do you add value to your clients?

Thank you. I bring value to my client base through my expertise along two key dimensions. The first is my knowledge of the retail and luxury sector in an international environment. The second is my knowledge of the job of a CIO. This experience base allows me to be very valuable to a wide array of companies addressing a variety of issues and challenges.

I have a very pragmatic approach to my work with my clients. I work with other consultants (individuals or companies) when needed, and my focus is on solving problems and getting results.

Examples of the types of engagements I have been brought in for include:

- Creating an IS strategic plan for mid-sized companies in luxury-focused sectors;
- Acting as a coach to less senior CIOs, helping them to progress as a CIO and within their company (e.g., advising them when they join the board); and
- Serving as an Executive Interim CIO.

Another newer offering of mine is something that I never anticipated but which has proven to be very interesting. Increasingly, I am asked to help large system integrators and others to understand and address the luxury sector, including how to market and sell to very large groups such as LVMH.

In that context, I've helped solutions providers in defining their commercial plans, reviewing their marketing approach, challenging their proposals, and role-playing the CIO who they want to market and sell to. The companies I work with in this respect are finding that this work greatly increases their marketing conversion rates and their sales close rates. If Marketing or Sales doesn't test their material before they deploy or present, they are less likely to be successful.

That last offering is fascinating and I'm sure you will be very busy with that service. Thank you very much for your insights today. I think many people who are marketing and selling to CIOs will find them helpful. Is there anything else you would like to add in closing?

Yes, there are two final things that are worth mentioning.

First, recognize that CIOs are mostly mature men who are not willing to talk and recognize their fears and weaknesses. The vendors that understand and navigate those limits will be better sellers than those who don't. Don't forget that you are selling to a person, not an organization.

Second and finally, it's very important to be sensitive to the CIO's industry dynamics. For example, in the luxury sector, the strategy and drivers are very different from most industries. One doesn't purchase an expensive watch or Vuitton bag every month. The time it takes to purchase is also quite different from other industries. The classic RFM analysis of purchases still works but has to be interpreted differently within the luxury sector. Customer service is key in the luxury industry. These are key drivers to have in mind when talking a CIO in that sector. In short, if you understand what drives industry success, you will understand what drives the CIO.

Fantastic advice. Thank you again, Pierre-Albert. I know you are very busy assisting your clients and growing your consulting business. I appreciate your taking the time to offer your excellent thoughts on how to effectively market and sell to CIOs.

More Insights on Selling to CIOs

We work with many companies to help them more effectively sell technology products and services. If you eager to improve your CIO selling and marketing skills, you will enjoy these articles on our Walker Sands site:

- [Selling to CIOs](#) — The definitive article on things to keep in mind when selling to CIOs. An oldie but a goodie!
- [Marketing to CIOs: Practical Advice for B2B Tech Marketers](#) – Selling to CIOs and marketing to CIOs must be tightly connected. We highlight a few CIO marketing best practices. We know these work because we've tested them in the field in our client work.
- [Selling to IT Managers](#) — How does one sell to the level below the CIO? Here are some practical tips.

Talk to Us About Your CIO Selling and CIO Marketing Challenges

Our insights, advice and services might be just what you need to improve your success rates with CIOs. We welcome your inquiries. [Contact us online](#) or call us at 312-235-6173.