

# *Selling Strategies: The New Requirements*

By John Ahn

While listening to a vendor presentation at a recent ISSA meeting, I noticed firsthand that there was something different about the message I was hearing. As a security recruiter who spends a fair amount of time working with sales and business development professionals, I pay close attention to the ways that sales people communicate with their customers. In this case, the sales person was describing a product that has a very specific application used to address a very specific problem. But in this case, the sales person was talking about how her product played a critical part as a component of a much bigger enterprise information risk management program.

Her talk struck home because the week before, I was in discussions with a new client, a growing security product vendor in the process of building its direct sales team. This was also a very niche-focused product vendor selling a unique point solution. While talking with the VP of Sales, we went over the usual list of candidate requirements. He was looking for people with classic sales experience that included strong motivation, communication skills, presentation skills, industry knowledge, a Rolodex, and a successful track record, but then he added something else. He made it very clear that although this was a technical point solution, he wanted sales people who understood his client's business well enough to sell the product as part of an overall solution. In fact, he even expressed a preference for candidates who came out of consulting or had worked in a corporate security organization.

In the past, there was usually a clear difference between those who sold services and those who sold products. The former had to know the client's business in order to identify big-picture problems requiring big-picture solutions. The latter just had to know their product and how it fit into the mix. This is changing, and we're seeing it across the board.

There are several reasons for this shift, but the biggest drivers are tied to regulatory and compliance requirements such as Sarbanes-Oxley and California SB-1386, to name a couple. In the past, most companies put a great deal of emphasis on defending against external and internal threats from malicious users. Now an equal or greater emphasis is being placed on "defending against the regulators" and meeting audit requirements. As a result, security products that may have been very good at solving specific problems are getting lost in the shuffle and not getting attention from decision makers who are faced with bigger challenges.

If you're looking for evidence of how regulatory requirements have affected product companies' approach to the market, you won't have to look far. Just go to any security product company's Web site and see how they describe their offerings. Just about everybody is talking about how their product is now a "solution" that will help their clients address regulatory requirements as well as traditional threats. Overall, this is a good thing. Spin factor aside, it means that product companies and their sales teams are working to understand the bigger picture and show how their offerings fit into it.

So what does this mean to security product sales professionals? It means that if they are going to differentiate themselves from their competition, they'll need to understand and articulate how the product they're selling fits into a client's overall risk management strategy. This

can only be accomplished by making the effort to understand their client's business model and how they are addressing both technology and regulatory risk. By doing so, it will allow one to use a more consultative selling strategy, which has several advantages—the opportunity to build stronger relationships, being seen as a sales person who “gets it,” and gaining hard-to-earn credibility with those who might mistrust sales professionals.

Ironically, everything that I just said in regards to product *sales* people applies to security practitioners as well. Now more than ever it's imperative that everyone, from security administrators to engineers to consultants, understand the business that they're supporting. The goal is no longer “locking down” an organization, but enabling it to be competitive while addressing the risks that threaten those capabilities. To do so, countermeasures must be measured and balanced regardless of whether you're a vendor selling a product to new clients or a practitioner selling a solution to your established internal clients.

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