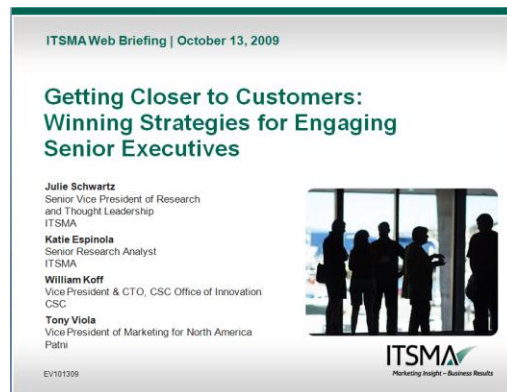


## ITSMA's Web Briefing Q&A

### Getting Closer to Customers: Winning Strategies for Engaging Senior Executives

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#### 1. **How interested are customers in being part of ongoing membership-based groups vs. one-off programs? What are the benefits?**

**ITSMA:** In our research with customers, we find that individuals are either interested in being part of membership groups, or they are not. Those that are not interested shy away from them because of the time commitment. The people most interested in membership-based groups are the most senior executives, the C-level. C-level executives want to be sure that the events they go to will include peers at their levels. Most of the time they prefer to be with executives from other industries to hear how they've handled similar issues. Membership-based groups help to give them such assurance. For them, the more exclusive, the better. The value the executives get from the group and/or meetings will really determine whether they will come back. The value comes from the content presented and the quality of the peer interactions.

**Tony:** The level of customer interest is directly related to the value they get out of being involved in such groups. C-level executives get a lot of their information about the value of tech and business initiatives from their peer group. Any forum that combines topic, atmosphere, peer and limited time commitment will generally work. If the forum is set up in a way that delivers tangible value to the group (such as reviewing the design of service offering that solves a particular business problem), long term participation can be obtained if the expectations are set accordingly at the beginning.

**Bill:** I think they are interested in both. Their interest level about an ongoing membership is the sustainability—sustaining threads of content and the value they get from that, the relationships they build with their peers. All of that is something you get from a membership-based program. One-off programs tend not to have that, but the reason why they would go to a one-off thing is mostly likely because of content, occasionally it's about the hospitality. So one is about an ongoing relationship around a combination of content, their peer relationships, and their relationships with CSC. And the other is more about the specific topic.

#### 2. **What are the challenges with membership-based programs?**

**ITSMA:** Getting a group of true peers together. Keeping the content fresh and relevant. Many of the companies that we speak to are happy if they can keep an executive engaged in a membership group for a two-year period. These companies expect the membership to churn and even believe that turnover in the membership is healthy.

**Tony:** Time commitment on the part of the attendees, derived value, scheduling, maintaining the correct level of participation.

**Bill:** There are a few challenges. Of course, their time is a big issue. But it's interesting, a lot of people talk about time being an issue, but we find that individuals, on a personal level, commit to these programs for a long period of time. So even if they change jobs, they'll continue to be a part of this group. Or sometimes we find the company maintains a relationship through the program and rotates people through that. And that's good too. So the time issue is interesting.

Our programs are not just about events. Our programs have events as part of them, but there are also research components, components for other ways they collaborate whether it's with us or other members. We also do video conferencing, workshops through video conferencing, etc. So it's not just their time in attending an event. It's a collection of all the different activities.

**3. *Is social media playing a part in your customer engagement programs? If so, how? And what are you using?***

**ITSMA:** ITSMA's recent How Customers Choose research, during which we interviewed 355 buyers across three continents, showed that senior executives are indeed using social media as part of their decision making process. And we see that nearly 80% of the companies that participated in our customer engagement survey are also using social media and company hosted online communities to engage customers. LinkedIn and Facebook are the most popular platforms, with Plaxo also popular in Europe. Only one company we have spoken with has used and continues to experiment with virtual meetings, however, some companies are setting up microsites, portals, or communities for event participants to facilitate continuation of the dialog. The microsites may include video, podcasts, discussion forums, and so forth.

**Tony:** We are using a variety of social media approaches now to interact with both technologist and business decision makers. Our primary vehicles are blogs and podcasts.

**Bill:** You name it technically we probably use it. We do podcasts of all our events and reports. We use discussion forums. We rolled out a service inside our insurance vertical called Wikonnnect, which is an equivalent of having Facebook but imbedded inside of a insurance product. I can't think of anything we don't do.

I think [with the channel preference] it's the nature of the individuals more than the content. People get a lot of value out of in-person events, they get value out of reports, they get value out of the various social media, and they get value out of virtual meetings. Some people do a variety of those and some just pick one.

**4. *Do you have any learnings that you can share on the process of internal content generation for some of the activities that you've discussed?***

**Tony:** For the our Executive Leadership Forum, Patni set the vision for the overall program, laid out the session topics and worked collaboratively with Boston College in developing the detailed abstracts and format. Patni set the direction and general guidelines for the session content, which was then developed and delivered by the BC faculty, our staff and by our customers.

PatniConnect follows the same approach—marketing develops the initial list of topics, which is reviewed by a steering committee after which it develops detailed abstracts for each session. Senior staff from the BUs affiliated with the session topics have the responsibility of running the sessions, preparing necessary material, and recruiting customer participants as necessary.

*Insight Magazine* is edited by Marketing and features contributed articles from across the company.

Our CIO roundtables are a collaborative effort between Marketing and our BUs. Session topics are a joint decision with Marketing taking the responsibility for developing the abstract, finding a moderator, and driving the recruiting process.

**Bill:** For us, meetings, papers, the whole suite of things that we do are all related to each other. So the way we do strategy around the content of those things is a number of ways. We have advisory boards of clients, advisory boards of academics, and an internal advisory board of our chief technologist and solutions directors. We also do our own market sensing research of the trends. This is how we come up with the big ideas that are directive—top down. We also try to tap into a bottom up approach. A number of our trends/market sensing mechanisms are from the bottom up. We have programs where we're trying to identify the trends based on what people out in the field are doing. There are different ways that we come up with a strategy of what the big issues are—both outside in and inside out.

The actual doing of research is our Office of Innovation acts as a program manger and VC incubator for the company. So we have funds that we push out to the rest of the organization. We're not trying to build an ivory tower. We don't view any of the things I've talked about as marketing. You could call them soft marketing. The actual activities are really about the content and thought leadership, and innovation in our solutions.

**5. *As a provider to the Government, we are prohibited in our "hospitality" type events. We also cannot "sponsor" the non-hospitality events due to government regulations around spending. Any suggestions?***

**Tony:** Change the emphasis from “hospitality” to “education” and use a third party—like an analyst group, consulting firm or other known entity in the area—to deliver your messaging for you and consider using other vehicles for delivery such as podcasts or webcasts.

**Bill:** Government clients participate in all of our events. We have very strict policies and guidelines about that participation as well as guidelines for how they can participate. We have a strict set of guidelines about how they can do that. This meets all of the regulatory issues. As long as you follow the rules, then they can participate in any event.

**6. *How have your account-based marketing programs evolved over the past few years? Expanded, contracted, become more or less relevant?***

**ITSMA:** According to ITSMA's recent research, ABM is expanding. At a handful of companies, ABM is no longer a separate marketing program, but the very fabric of how the company markets. Of course, ABM has undergone a substantial transformation since it was introduced six or so years ago. Today there are many “flavors” of ABM, even at the same company. There is a good deal of emphasis on leveraging ABM assets (create once, use many) to aid in scaling the programs. In addition to ABM, many companies are adopting a Collaborative Account Planning (<http://www.itsma.com/research/collaborative-account-planning/>) approach whereby marketing and sales work together to build the account plan, and then may or may not continue to build an account-based marketing plan.

**Tony:** I would say that ABM has certainly taken hold within our company, although we seem to have gravitated to the “Heinz” approach in execution (there are 57 different varieties). We will do everything from customer dinners to onsite celebrations of relationships.

**Bill:** Historically, CSC was a very decentralized organization. We have become more and more centralized. There is much more coordinated corporate activity around sales and marketing in how we approach accounts. There is still some variation from sector to sector. But more and more have common programs within those sector buckets. From a thought leadership point of view, in the Office of Innovation we created an Account Innovation Program, which sits in between account based marketing programs and delivery. It's a way for our clients to more actively participate. And it's a way for us to be more disciplined about how our clients participate in our thought leadership.

**7. How do you capture the attention of busy senior executives at your customer accounts?**

**ITSMA:** The top two drivers to participate in solutions providers' relationship-building programs, is to provide input and influence the providers' offerings and strategic direction and to network with their peers. Buyers want to be heard and want to listen to others like them.

In our surveys, customers tell us that they have three criteria they use when deciding which programs to participate in:

- The relationship they have with the company holding or sponsoring the event/program
- The relevancy of the content/speakers
- The other participants

The companies that are most successful at getting the attention of senior executives do a lot of research to understand the content and speakers that their audience would like to hear. If anything sounds like a sales pitch (or even remotely hints of one) senior executives lose interest. Therefore, the content has to be about ideas, trends, the industry, etc. It cannot be about your solutions.

**Tony:** It really comes down to being able to understand their business pain and addressing it using the right aspect of the marketing mix that enables them to get the latest information without obligating them to buy into anything or make any up front commitments outside of some time. Senior executives will take the time to talk with you if they feel you have nailed the issues they are dealing with and can put them in a position of dealing with them successfully.

**Bill:** I think they come to these events for a combination of reasons—one is about the content, one is about relationships with CSC, and another is about the social relationships that they can build with their peers across the CSC family (across all industries). So at any given role, they can participate in the content and relationship stuff as part of a CSC event.

I don't think any one of those things can stand on its own. You need more than one of those things to sustain executive participation.

**8. Do you have a different strategy for new relationships?**

**ITSMA:** Many of the solutions providers we talk to tell us that they use third-party speakers, such as industry analysts, political figures, or recognized business luminaries, when they want to attract executives that they do not yet have a relationship with. The content and headline talent is the draw. Others believe that a combination business/hospitality event is the way to go. A round of golf with a pro or front row seats at the Olympics might do the trick! Sometimes it just depends on the individual.

**Tony:** Yes. Roundtables tend to be a good vehicle for engaging new clients as the atmosphere is more intimate and the invitation to attend is positioned as more exclusive. Our customer meeting is used in somewhat the same way as is some of our more broadly-based lead gen programs such as webcasts. We tend to use ABM as a mechanism to approach our existing strategic and key accounts.

**Bill:** I think it's similar to what I said before—it's still about the content. In this case, it's about the relationship they could potentially build with their peers. And it's part of the relationship with the account person who's working with them at CSC. I think it's a combination of these things.

**9. Do you involve third parties at your events? Do you use all your own content or do you tap into outside speakers?**

**ITSMA:** Some companies only use third parties/outside speakers, limiting their company-content to informal conversations. Others look for more of a balance. There does not seem to be a right or wrong approach here. It just depends on your topics, audience expectations, and program objectives.

**Tony:** We utilize outside speakers or moderators wherever and whenever our budget allows.

**Bill:** We always have CSC speakers, outside speakers, and client speakers. We use that formula at almost every event.

**10. Why is it important to have a centrally managed, integrated customer engagement strategy and program? What are the benefits?**

**ITSMA:** In our Customer Engagement survey, 93% either have a formal, comprehensive Customer Engagement strategy for their company or business unit, or are in the process of implementing one. So this appears to be a priority! Certainly, there is a lot to be gained by centrally managing the customer engagement program in terms of efficiency, consistent messaging, and asset reuse. It helps for the “right hand” to know what the “left hand” is doing, especially at large, multi-division companies. You wouldn’t want the software division inviting a C-level executive to a meeting at the same time the outsourcing group is also extending an invitation to the same individual. Coordination is essential. Some companies don’t have a centrally managed program, but they do keep a central calendar to avoid this unfortunate circumstance. Another huge benefit is best-practice sharing. However, execution is often best left to the local organizations. Customs and cultures vary so widely that it would not make sense to assume that the customer engagement program launched in Germany will play well in Brazil. Therefore, having a global committee or management office that facilitates optimal resource utilization, consistency, and best practice sharing is a great value add.

**Tony:** Our company utilizes a shared services marketing model where branding elements, process and methodologies are created by corporate and applied across regions in a uniform manner. Programs that are driven centrally—such as *Insight*—are done to facilitate a production process and generally reflect contributed material from across the company’s geographies. The preponderance of program development is driven regionally to support local market share and revenue objectives. This approach ensures consistency as far as critical branding elements are concerned while giving us the freedom to develop highly customized programs that support local business goals.

**Bill:** Our Office of Innovation is a centrally managed program. Since we’re not strictly a centralized organization, there are programs that do happen in other BUs that tend to be very focused on that BU. For example, our Financial Services group does a lot of large scale client events focused on a well defined topic for that vertical. There is no good reason why you would want to try to manage that centrally. The centrally managed programs tend to be very horizontal, in terms of technology, certain issues, trends, etc. These rely on case studies from the various industry components.

So, for us, a combination of centrally managed set of programs, which are horizontally based and are universally shared across the company are important. Then we have the flexibility and the need to be very vertically or application oriented to a particular BU, for some events. To my knowledge, I can’t think of a case where there is any contention across those. They’re complementary.

**11. What is the role of account managers and consulting partners in your customer engagement programs? How do they participate?**

**ITSMA:** We've learned that unless you have sales onboard, then your program is not going to succeed. Sales own the relationships. So it's important to keep them in the loop and continue to get their point of view and input about your programs. Best practice companies involve account managers at every step. Marketing and account managers work together to select the accounts to be invited to the various programs. Often times the account managers hand deliver invitations to senior executives (although we have discovered that executives prefer their invitations to be delivered via email!).

Interestingly, many senior customer engagement programs bar account managers and other sales people from attending. The belief is that senior executives don't want to be sold to and by keeping the sales people away, program managers are assured that no selling will take place. (Remember, with senior customer engagement, selling is just another word for failing!) Others have the account managers attend during the more social bits of the programs for informal discussion. When the audience is more junior and technical, client engagement program managers are more likely to have account managers and sales people in attendance.

Once an event or program ends, it is important to close any open items with clients. This is another opportunity for the account managers to get involved. It might even be appropriate at the end of a program to ask participants if they want their account managers to follow up with them.

**Tony:** Account managers and consulting partners play a critical role in the development and execution of our programs. They are involved in everything from the identification of program topics to recruitment and follow-up.

**Bill:** Because we're not a marketing or sales set of programs, this is a topic that does come up often. Our commitment to our customers is that when they participate in these types of things, they're not being sold to, they're not even being marketed to, strictly speaking. It's really about the content. Having said that, for some programs, we encourage the account manager to sit side-by-side with their client. We have long relationships with these clients. So we do encourage them to be there. Account managers are different from sales. Sales are much more about the cold selling and business developers. Account managers build relationship as we deliver services. We completely discourage anyone to sell anything. Pure sales people tend not to be invited. We try to separate those two.

With consulting partners, this is a little different. The partner is kind of both a sales person and account manager. When we do have a client that is a consulting client, we do encourage the consulting partner as an account manager to be there, but it's about building the relationship and sharing learnings—it's not about selling.

**12. How does the customer engagement program staff communicate with sales account managers and vice versa?**

**Tony:** Email, telephone, internal newsletters, intranet postings, arm twisting and threats of physical violence.

**Bill:** We use every vehicle we have—email, phone, portals, wikis, lots of broadcast communications across the corporation, etc. We use all of these to inform the sales people what's going on with the programs and accounts. For example, we did a video clip to be sent out in a newsletter about an event that's coming up. You name the tool and we're using it. We do both push and pull. We are constantly pushing on them what's happening. We have so many different ways they can pull—public websites, private websites, portals, wikis, and internal social collaboration environment. There are so many ways we communicate. And it's still hard.

**a. What kinds of feedback loops are in place?**

**ITSMA:** In our Customer Engagement survey, we found that only about 60% of the companies are gathering sales' feedback on the usefulness of Customer Engagement activities/programs. Also, less than 50% of companies have a formal feedback loop between marketing and sales, giving them input to and from the Customer Engagement programs. These feedback loops are important to have. This will help build credibility with sales, get them onboard, and improve your programs in the process. Sales people want help to develop relationships, so if they feel your programs do this, then they'll be happy to help. The only way you'll know is if you talk to them, get their feedback, and take action based on this feedback.

Some companies we've spoken to hold monthly calls with sales who have accounts involved in their customer engagement programs. They discuss the satisfaction with the activities and what is happening with these accounts that the sales people should be aware of. They make sure everyone is on the same page and happy with the program. Since marketing and sales are tightly aligned, marketing has gained the support and credibility of these programs from sales.

**Tony:** We conduct in-event surveys for our major customer events, for all of our customer visits and to constantly monitor the effectiveness of our service delivery. Our event surveys cover the event itself (content, facilities, etc) as well as industry trends and buying behavior. Market trends survey are published via PR and shared with firms such as Forrester as primary research.

**Bill:** We're pretty disciplined about this. We do many things. For our big strategic accounts, as part of our quarterly reviews, there are questions about innovation and event participation. So on a regular basis (4 times a year) for our biggest accounts, we're getting feedback in a general sense.

We also do annual surveys of clients, of all the analysts, and of all internal. We're asking their opinion about what we're doing around these various programs. Specifically, at the program level, at end of each event, the customers are asked to fill out surveys. Many of our programs, we survey our customers on an annual basis. So there is a lot of information coming back to us.