

Preparation:

- Research on the customer (turnover, growth, products, stated aims, stated strategies, culture and strengths);
- Research on the market (emerging trends, main players, size, growing/shrinking, macro-economic factors (eg is the market driven by the housing market or unemployment));

Set the scene:

- Send an agenda/have a pre-meeting telephone call that sets the expectation that you are interested in how your product or service can help the business achieve its aims – you are not turning up to talk about features or technology.

Questions/topics for the meeting:

- Set out to understand the following things as a result of the meeting:
- What the company produces (you can have an interesting conversation about this – many businesses don't really understand what they produce – ask them what their customers are actually buying ie the benefit they are seeking);
- How many/how much they produce (if they know or don't know you have an opportunity to discuss how your product or service can streamline manufacturing, production or fulfillment processes);
- What is important to their customers (don't just accept "service" or "price" – ask what the first one means and how they set the second one). Again, almost any answer will be an opportunity to talk about how your product or service could support this);
- What is their USP? What do they do better/faster/differently – and how does this match the previous answer? (How can your product or service help them do this better/faster/differently. Do they measure it? Can your product or service help them measure it/achieve it?);
- What are they better at than the competition? Where do they need to improve?
- What is changing in their marketplace? Does this provide them with an opportunity or is it a threat? How are they going to use your product or service to help?
- How do they get the best from their staff? How would they like their staff to feel about working for them? How can your product or service help them achieve this?
- What are the top three challenges they are facing? Why are they so important? How can your product or service help them meet these challenges?

Of course, the actual questions will vary based on what your company sells and what the client does. But, to take an extreme example, even if you are a roofer talking to a solicitor then a suitably-adapted version of this approach will build rapport and empathy and show your prospect that you understand their need better than the next company and therefore will provide a better solution.