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**Getting your first Reference**

**Customers in a New Market**

Customers find themselves in a chicken and egg situation when it comes to entering new markets. It is difficult to make sales without credibility and it is difficult to have credibility without sales. As a CARIFORUM firm, you will be expected to have sales made in the Region or perhaps the EU/UK. However, depending on the sector, sales to other countries will mean you are taken more seriously

**Market Research**

A ‘one size fits all’ approach is unlikely to work when it comes to tackling reference sales in different countries. You will need to be sensitive to specific market requirements. This means doing market research and deciding where and how to invest your resources.

If you feel you have the right product, but no track record in the market, your marketing and sales efforts will need to hammer home key messages about the calibre of your people, the quality of your product and the level at which it has been verified. Above all, you will need to stress the Unique Selling Points (USPs) of your product. Without these, why should your client choose you above a supplier with established customers?

Timing, and therefore market research, will be critical to your breakthrough. Inevitably, there comes a time when established suppliers don’t have what your customer needs. If you are in the right place, at the right time, with the right product – and talking the right language – you will be listened to.

While a first reference sale is hugely important, it doesn’t mean rushing into the first deal possible. Focusing on a high-calibre client who is known to demonstrate the values your sector admires, may take more effort but promises far greater rewards in the long run. On the other hand, a low-grade reference sale may create more problems than it is worth.

**If your potential client calls you to a meeting**

• **Demonstrate your competence**

Show up in numbers equal to your prospect’s team and be prepared to discuss details and specifics. Show market focus. Too much experience in areas not relevant to the customer may make you appear a jack-of-all-trades. Be prepared. ‘Winging it’ or ‘playing it by ear’ on the details will certainly be fatal.

• **Show your confidence**

Do not be afraid to ask intelligent questions about specifications or the tender. The nature of your questions should demonstrate your organisation’s vast expertise in this area.

• **Prove your commitment**

Your first bid will get you noticed as a competitive contractor or supplier. Even if not successful, it provides an opportunity to learn and understand the client’s requirements. If a number of further bids are required to win a coveted reference sale, demonstrate you have the stamina and commitment required.

*Do your research thoroughly. “Fifty per cent of the success of the sale is down to the research undertaken by the suppliers before their first meeting with the customer”*

**Tips**

* If you are working with an agent or distributor, you may be able to use their reputation as leverage. Offering your partner significant discounts and competitive margins may also motivate initial sales. However, it is important to ensure these incentives are in line with your strategic goals.
* Some creativity may take you to a dealmaker situation. Can you offer concessions and/or additional services to early adopters of your product?
* Let your potential client know that they are being targeted because of their profile.
* It pays to be daring. If you can win a sale in a market where your major competitors dominate, you are likely to win elsewhere too.
* Get others to recommend you. If you work with companies or distributors who have a large, loyal customer base, their clients are far more likely to accept their recommendation.