

T Link Enterprises

Trudy A. Milburn

At 7:30 A.M. Eastern Standard Time, people began to fill the conference room. A continental breakfast had been set up in the corner of the room. Helping himself to coffee, Michael St. John,* the Western European market director, began. "I was with T Link way back when we were just making cable connectors. And now look at us, positioning ourselves as a provider of global networking communication services." Michael continued without really expecting anyone to answer him. "Do you think it's possible we'll accomplish anything in a two-day meeting? We have too many issues that are unique to each region and can't be resolved easily. And it's not as if everyone is going to be here."

Yao Gia, the Asian and Pacific Rim market director, looked down at his pastry. Not sure that he should answer, but feeling like someone should because a question was posed, Yao answered quietly, "I believe we will hear updates on each territory. The difference I see is that this time the memo stated we will try to create a standard and efficient global system."

Michael asked, "Well, what about the feasibility team? Weren't they exploring regions in Africa?"

"Um, yes." Speaking rapidly but still softly, Yao continued, "I understood that if they could not produce specific projections by the first of the month, and did not have a well-developed action plan, they would not be invited to the meeting."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, that's what I understand. Excuse me, can you confirm the time this meeting was to begin?" asked Yao.

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"It was scheduled to begin at 8 A.M., but you know that someone is always late."

Dottie Corran, the North American market director, walked over to join the conversation. Pausing from her cup of coffee, she injected, "I hear Wilkins isn't going to make it."

"From what I know," Michael said, "his biggest account—almost 60% of his entire sales—demanded a meeting with him in Estonia tomorrow morning. I think our competitors are trying to move in on us there." They began taking seats around the large conference table.

Down the hallway, Abigail Craft, vice president of marketing and sales, was approached by her assistant, Lenny. He handed her a note from the feasibility team. It read:

We found out you were holding a meeting to discuss global sales and were hoping we could sit in. Even though we have yet to complete our profitability and growth analysis of the region, we believe that we would make a valuable contribution to the meeting overall and feel that not being included may appear to be a slight to certain members of our organization.

Abigail looked into the room, then turned to her assistant, folded the note signed by the vice president of product extension services, who also led the feasibility team, and said, "Where is Mr. Castelanos? We can't begin without him."

Lenny answered, "He hasn't called in. I can try to find out." Abigail shook her head disgustedly as she walked in. Seeing the others, she gave them a courtesy hello by nodding her head and then began setting out papers.

Five minutes later, Andreas Castelanos, the Latin American market director, walked in. He approached Abigail and said, "Excuse me, Vice President Craft, I apologize for my tardiness," and took a seat at the far end of the large conference table next to Dottie. "*Buenos dias*, Mrs. Corran, how are you? How is your husband?"

Dottie replied, "I'm doing well, thank you. How's business?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

"I cannot complain," said Andreas, nodding his head down and holding it in a respectful position. "How are your children? Aren't they still in grade school?"

"Yes, James is 11 now and Tess is 6. How was your flight here?"

Andreas responded, "Oh, thank you for asking. It was a nice flight. I was thinking about the meeting on the way over in preparation for our discussion of our cultural differences, as the vice presi-

dent requested. Tell me, how is it with your Hispanic customers in California? I was wondering if those tensions were among your most pressing issues. I'm interested in hearing more about your view on them."

Dottie asked in a surprised voice, "Well, who are you talking to? Who's telling you that? I speak to my reps on a weekly basis, and that's not what I'm hearing."

"Pardon me." He stood up quickly to get some coffee.

At 8:10 A.M. Abigail motioned to her assistant to get Henry Wilkins, the Eastern Europe and Russian market director, on the phone for the conference call. Once Lenny confirmed that Henry was on the line, Abigail began the meeting by matter-of-factly thanking everyone for attending, and then launched into her opening remarks.

"I have asked all of you here today to capitalize on all of our successes these past three years with the intention of creating a system whereby successful sales and marketing techniques in one region can become standardized and meshed into a global sales model. As I mentioned in the memo, this will facilitate the training of additional salespeople as we increase market share in each region. As we all have experienced, turnover has been quite high. That, coupled with our intentions to increase services around the globe, will mean that we will be training substantial numbers of new employees over the next 18 months. Recall, as well, that I intend to start transferring successful sales reps and sales supervisory staff to new regions. I have every intention of making T Link truly a global enterprise."

T Link Enterprises began operations in the 1970s making cable connections. Since then it had expanded into providing global networking communication services, including cellular, broadband, and IP networks for both consumers and businesses. From Abigail's perspective the last five years had been the period of the most dramatic change—both in the technology T Link had developed and marketed and in sales. Sales had increased from \$50 million to \$100 million in the last two years alone, following unprecedented technological advances that T Link had successfully moved from business to consumer applications. More important, in America and Europe, T Link had excelled in persuading consumer customers to buy value-added services after signing up for their initial cellular phone service contracts. In developing regions of the world, T Link had been successful in establishing the networks that allowed cellular

phone service to be viable where broadband and IP networks were not. In different ways in different parts of the world, T Link had established itself as an industry leader. Hoping to capitalize on both their consumer and business markets, T Link now planned to continue adding multimedia products and services.

Abigail continued, "Most importantly, though, we need to create a global sales model to explore untapped opportunities. And that's the primary thrust of today's meeting. Thus far, we have been operating under a model in place since the company began. Initially we hired sales reps in each region and asked them to use their contacts to sell our services. We didn't think so much about strategic sales. Being the first in the market, we were able to focus on quick growth to create brand awareness and service capabilities as rapidly as possible. Now that we have established a number one—and number two, depending on the region—market share, we need to take stock of staying profitable in our current regions, as well as developing untapped markets."

She paused for emphasis. "The way we are going to do this," Abigail said firmly, "is to take the next two days to examine our differences and create an overall sales strategy as well as a process that will help us meet our targeted growth rates."

On a signal from Abigail, Lenny handed out copies of Abigail's slide presentation. Before the market directors could flip through the handouts, Abigail indicated for Lenny to dim the lights. The first slide was projected on the screen at the end of the room. Before addressing the group again, Abigail turned to the speakerphone and asked, "Henry, can you view these online now?"

After a short delay, Henry responded, "Yes, thank you. Abigail, I'm sorry I was late getting connected to the meeting, but I just returned from my client meeting. And I'm sorry to say, I can't stay online long. I'm meeting with the client once again in about 45 minutes. My presentation to the director of purchasing is tomorrow."

Abigail didn't respond. She turned her attention to the slide on the screen, which the market directors were reading.

1. Given that there are language and other communication differences, do we create one system and then translate it into different languages?

OR

2. Do we think about how sales might be conducted differently in other countries and try to create localized versions?

OR

3. Do we incorporate the best of what works in each country into one global sales process?

Speaking loudly and distinctly, Abigail brought her listeners' attention back to the meeting. "Okay, let's start by going around and having each person define the top three concerns for their region."

Looking around to see who was going to start, Dottie finally initiated the discussion. "Our issues relate to customer service in the business market. After we make an initial sale, the sales staff—especially in some of our southern California areas—have difficulty closing on the value-added components. Los Angeles is a particular problem. For example, our staff members are Korean and our clients are primarily African American. Based on my troubleshooting trips, I find that staff and clients describe different scenarios. And I simply do not know how to resolve it. African American clients often describe our staff as being suspicious of them, often making them wait for an extended time before helping them. When I interviewed the staff to try to discover the reasons for the difficulties, they described the clients' behavior as impolite. I really don't know what to do. So I have simply been visiting each site, listening to and watching what is happening as staff interact with clients."

Abigail asked, "Can you describe a typical interaction?"

Dottie replied: "Well, companies place orders for a variety of business network connection services. Our clients' employees then come to the service centers to get particular items. And you know that many of our clients are unsure of exactly which switches and connectors they need. Of course, the sales staff pull the contracts, where this is all specified. Because the technical specifications are part of the contract, they don't understand why the individuals picking up the parts have difficulty making specific requests. It also seems that some of our clients want to engage in small talk and our staff members do not respond to that very well. After watching one such interaction, I

pressed a staff member to say something about what just happened. He hesitantly indicated that he thought the client was loud and aggressive.”

Abigail looked up to ask the others, “What’s happening in other areas?”

Although she had just described one problem, Dottie spoke up once again, intending to keep anyone else from speaking. She wanted to continue with the problems she was facing. “We have also noticed a similar kind of interaction problem between our Arab American staff and customers in the Detroit area. Customers seem to want to engage in much more small talk. And sometimes they ask for directions to install the component. Of course, our sales staff can’t answer those types of questions.”

Seeing the annoyed expression on Abigail’s face, Dottie decided these two examples were enough.

Yao was the next to explain his experiences. “Well, I apologize if this is not related, but we have some issues with our Japanese sales reps when they interact with Chinese customers. They become frustrated that decisions have to be made by an entire group rather than by one person. It seems to take forever for a client to come to a decision.”

Andreas interrupted Yao. “Abigail, we have issues with gaining respect. Our reps in Mexico seem to have some difficulty when they talk with clients in Argentina. Sales there have been weak lately due to economic circumstances, I am sorry to report. The reps have trouble with the form of address. It is very confusing to them. Instead of speaking to them formally, Argentineans use the familiar form *vos*, which is similar to our *tu*, when they should be using a more polite form, such as *usted*. Granted, the Spanish language is spoken differently in the two countries, but this simple matter of addressing one another seems to create a lot of tension during the sales process.”

“Okay, thank you for that input.” Abigail turned again to address the speakerphone. “Henry, now what can you tell us from your perspective?”

Silence. About 30 seconds went by before Abigail asked if the connection was working.

Finally, those in the meeting room heard Henry. “Yes, we have a connection,” he confirmed apologetically. There was a pause again, for about 10 seconds. “The issues for us here in Eastern Europe are a bit different—perhaps an example would clarify. When I call on Rus-

sian clients, they simply demand a lower price than we are offering. Of course, many reps report that they need to pay small bribes to be directed to the right person.

“And, because products made for Russia and most of the newly independent states require a different electrical connection, there are similar problems when our Russian clients talk with the product development team in New Jersey.”

“Okay,” Abigail responded, “but product development isn’t really the issue here today. We are trying to answer the question of how we create customer relationships so that we can sell value-added services to our customers and create long-term sales for ourselves.”

Henry replied, “Yes, I understand that.”

Launching once again into her idea and pointing at the screen, Abigail said assertively, “The issue now becomes how we use what we have learned locally to shape our global sales force. For example, do we simply insert a cultural summary for each nation—for instance, as a chapter at the end of a training manual? Or, more ideally, I believe, do we integrate these differences into our sales process and create a new approach?”

Eagerly, Michael chimed in, “Well, I think we should just let each region continue to operate independently. They seem to be doing all right and then we don’t offend anyone.”

“Um, no. Um, I think the point she is trying to make is that integration will bring efficiency,” Yao added hesitantly.

Before Yao could continue, Andreas commented, “Yes, yes. The efficiencies will produce a definite cost advantage if we can all work within the same sales model.”

“Please excuse me,” Yao interjected, and after a pause continued, “I was going to say that while efficiencies can be produced by a consistent sales process, I do not think that we can effectively integrate all of our cultural differences into a standard training program or even a training manual.”

Not seeing anyone else who wanted to contribute, Abigail moved the conversation along. “Okay, good dialogue. I have a suggestion. For the sake of trying to determine if we can create one global model that works, let’s start with an understanding of how our differences fit into our current sales process.”

Abigail motioned to Lenny and a new slide appeared.

1. Timeline of sales process
2. Channels/media
3. Communication issues in face-to-face sales interactions
 - Forms of address
 - Use of pauses and silence
 - Turn taking and interruptions
 - Frequency and quantity of conversation
 - Purpose of interaction
 - Information exchange
 - Demonstration of product

Before anyone could respond or ask a question, another slide was shown.

Customer
Needs
Expectations
Value chain
Where do our products and services fit into their business or personal use?
Transaction model or relationship model?
Focus on products and services?

Again, before anyone could comment, Abigail directed the group's conversation. "Let's continue to talk about where in this process our cultural differences are most acute. Also, how do pricing, implementation, and delivery affect our customer relationships? Who would like to start?"

Michael spoke up. "I'll start. Which slide are we supposed to be addressing? And why weren't the people on the feasibility team included in today's meeting?" ♦

* This case has been developed based on real organization(s) and real organizational experiences. Names, facts, and situations have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and organizations.

Trudy A. Milburn (Ph.D., University of Massachusetts, Amherst) is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Baruch College, the City University of New York.