

# What Is a “Green Field” Sales Strategy?

By Tom Saine & Thomas Williams



In many regards, account managers—especially those charged with managing large, revenue generating account teams—have to adopt two very different mindsets. On one hand, they must develop a powerful defensive strategy to insure the competition doesn’t gain a foothold that compromises existing business. On the other hand, they must craft an offensive strategy that will grow

their stake in the business. While many account managers, strive for incremental growth year-over-year, the very best managers are obsessed with developing a powerful green field strategy that will expand significantly their portfolio of products and services.

In this week’s article, we explore:

- What is a green field strategy?
- Why do account managers ignore green field opportunities?
- Why do green fields provide excellent selling opportunities?

Next week, we will examine:

- What are the building blocks essential to crafting a green field strategy?
- What questions can guide strategy development?

## What is a Green Field Strategy?

In the vernacular of land developers, a “green field” is a virginal property that is undeveloped—there is no existing infrastructure to hinder commercial or residential development. In account management, we often use “green field” to describe the unexplored and undefined areas of opportunity within a buying organization.



A green field strategy is a penetration plan designed to broach the untouched or undeveloped areas. Often selling organizations are so focused on well-defined product sales opportunities that they miss the green field altogether. Consider the following scenarios:

- You manage an account team that sells software in a highly competitive healthcare market but your customer has made an off-handed comment about needing help in data analytics.

- You manage an account team that sells and services a portfolio of IT equipment to a Fortune 100 company. Your customer is trying to decide if it would be beneficial to attend a conference on cyber security.

In a rapidly changing world of global expansion, corporate consolidation and product revision, a green field opportunity may surface quickly. Both of the scenarios suggest the presence of a green field.

In a recent account review session, a global account manager for a software company was asked, “Now that your customer (a large restaurant chain) is planning to expand to Asia, do you see any opportunity to increase your sales?” The answer we got was, “Possibly...but I want to wait until the dust settles and see if they can make a go of it first.” In other words, the global account manager just took a “pass” on a possible green field.

Consider for a moment the lineage of most enterprise initiatives. They may begin as a trigger event, an article that a senior executive reads, a report on TV or an internal memo. The stimulus provokes dialogue and, in time, group discussion at the executive level. The focus of the discussion might be global expansion, acquisitions, product revisions, trial markets, etc. Some ideas are translated into definable initiatives or projects while others never get off the ground. Some initiatives find support from internal sponsors willing to incubate and nourish the project. Others seem too complex or vague or risky and are tabled for the moment.

There lies a green field.

Another way of characterizing a green field: it is the quadrant where people with whom the account manager has little or no contact are discussing ideas that are not fully defined. In the graphic below, there are two dimensions of space. The initiative or project is either defined or undefined. The discussions are led by, and involve, people the account manager knows or people that are unknown.

Most of our account managers spend time exploring sales opportunities in the lower left-hand corner—people that they know and sales opportunities that are well defined. The lower right-hand quadrant is owned by the competition—our account managers don’t have the contact base to sell effectively. The upper left-hand corner involves people we know discussing challenges or initiatives that are undefined...thought of as a bone yard of ideas that have no traction. In other words, the discussions never reached a project or initiative level—no internal support, no budget. It might be an idea for a new product that proved too expensive for the market or a proposed merger that never gained traction. Most organizations have a closet filled with topics that have been rehashed all too frequently.

Undefined  
Projects

Defined  
Projects



The green field lies in the remaining quadrant—people the account managers don't know discussing ideas that lack clarity, definition and support about a challenge or opportunity. Let's look at why account managers steer away from green fields and why they provide excellent selling opportunities.

### **Why Do Account Managers Ignore Green Field Opportunities?**

We were having lunch with a group of sales representatives and account managers during a recent account planning session and asked the group "when and how frequently do you engage members of the executive team within your strategic accounts?" We received an interesting response: "We have very little to offer them and, quite frankly, they have very little to offer us." Another said, "We are completely off

their radar.” A third told us, “I’ve got connections that will give me a shout if the senior staff want me to show up.”

Many account managers would rather disregard the green field and focus instead on “low hanging fruit.” These are five reasons for their reluctance.



1. **Green field opportunities can mean more research and investigative work, resources & time than sales representatives are willing to invest.** Since they are venturing into discussions that are not focused on their product, they need to familiarize themselves with market conditions and competitive forces that concern their customers. Sales representatives must know what drives their customer’s customer.
2. **Green field opportunities often involves a longer sales cycle than is comfortable for the sales representative or the selling organization.** In most traditional selling opportunities, the buying organization has already defined a need, sized the problem, and composed a list of potential vendors for a solution. Green field opportunities start off as undefined fears, concerns and challenges that exist only as conversation topics in a board or committee meeting. They want someone who can help them bring these challenges into focus in order to take action.
3. **Green field opportunities often involve greater corporate resources from the selling organization.** Sales representatives may need to enlist technical specialists, help from the consulting side and participation from senior executives. Some companies organize “executive briefings” as a way to demonstrate thought leadership.
4. **Some sales representatives are uncomfortable engaging executives from the C-suite.** While sales representatives may feel comfortable with department heads and members of the technical team, senior executives are a different matter entirely. In the C-suite you can win or lose big. That’s why green field pursuits require planning, resources and strategy.

5. **The pursuit of green field opportunities often requires consulting skills as well as selling acumen.** Executives in the buying organization are looking for thought leadership, an ability to break a large project into “bite-size” pieces. They are hoping to find a single voice not a choir of different opinions. They want change management skills.

### Why Do Green Fields Provide Excellent Selling Opportunities?



There are four (4) powerful reasons why sales teams should focus on developing the green field in high volume strategic accounts.

1. **Executives from the buying organization are most receptive to innovation and change.** If you can help them understand the size, scope and urgency of the challenge or opportunity, understand market forces at play and share solutions adopted by your customers, you may elevate yourself to the role of trusted advisor.
2. **There is little or no competition.** This “open window” may not last for long. At the onset, however, there is no defined sales opportunity to warrant an RFP or to alert the competition. It is so early in the incubation process that traditional sales representatives are in the dark.
3. **The dollar size of the deal can be huge.** While complex and undefined, the opportunity landscape may be fertile with high price tag projects.
4. **Green field pursuits may build strong relationships and open lines of communication at the top between the buying and selling organization.** The challenge for the sales representative is to design a plan that interlaces members of the selling organization with their counterparts in the buying organization. Greenfield opportunities require team selling. The account manager’s task is to orchestrate one-on-one connections.

### Parting Thoughts

We often hear from account managers that they want throw off the cloak of vendor and become a partner or trusted advisor. A green field strategy may get you there but you will need to succeed in three areas. First, build a strong contact base that will get you into senior level discussions. Penetrate the “people you don’t know” area. Second, bring relevant expertise to the party. A green field strategy requires strong teams and

partnerships. Third, you will need to be persistent and patient. You will need to plant and cultivate before you harvest your field.

As always we welcome your thoughts and input. Let's start a discussion and elevate the sales profession with a thoughtful, civil and informative discourse.

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