Don’t Just Sell Engineers. Sell the Finish Line.

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“Should we charge for the engineers?” is the question founders, CROs and investors ask me most right now. The better question is what the customer will commit in exchange for getting into production, because for a smaller AI/SaaS company, deployment can be how you beat a bigger name rather than a cost that quietly eats your margin.

My answer: don’t give deployment away to keep a deal moving. Trade it for a commitment that makes the investment worth making.

The largest vendors have made embedded engineering part of how they sell.

At the same time, buyers are setting 2027 budgets with finance in the room, Gartner is advising CIOs to settle AI funding, ownership and accountability with their CFOs, and only 36% of the leaders it surveyed expect to hit the cost reductions they promised. A customer under that pressure wants a result it can defend in a budget review.

Trade deployment for commitment

Before engineers are deployed, the customer commits to budget, sponsorship and working with our organization. There is a difference between a pilot, a bake-off and “we would like to adopt your technology,” and the engineers belong in the last one, where the customer has agreed what success looks like and what it’s worth to them.

There are three offers in the market right now:

- **The weak offer:** pay us to explore whether we can help, with no decision attached.
- **The stronger offer:** commit to the agreed production scope, and we will invest in getting you operational.
- **The dangerous offer:** we will keep building until you decide whether to buy. It is the one Q4 pressure produces.

Including deployment in the price is a pricing decision. Starting open-ended work before the customer has decided to buy is a financing decision, and most smaller companies can’t afford to be

their customer's lender.

Include deployment for a targeted workstream

Deployment belongs in the price when it's a very targeted workstream, because the customer has committed to our workload and our engineers can help them best fit their outcome, not re-architect their entire stack.

Here's what that looks like in practice. A client I'm working with, who has agreed to let me share this, ran a full pipeline review and QBR with me in Q3, and we changed the proposals they had coming up. The team had planned to compete with open-ended pilots, and we replaced them with a committed production agreement as part of the close.

I asked the team to do what I ask every team to do: picture the customer's experience if we win. From there, sales and presales separated customer-specific work from the deployment we would include, kept to the parts of the solution that really mattered to the customer's outcome, and found our strongest advantage: closing the gap to customer commitment sooner.

That matters because AI deals tend to either fail early or move fast, and early sponsorship decides which. Customers have moved past "we have to do AI" to "is this a sponsored, budgeted AI initiative?" With commitment, sponsorship and an agreed outcome, we have a deal.

A committed production agreement is now required before a deal can enter the commit stage. Deals without a sponsor and budget didn't leave the pipeline. They stayed at an earlier stage, and the team learned sooner which ones would get funded, before spending engineering time on them. The commit stage shrank a little at first, but the committed deals moved faster, because they already had a sponsor. What's left in the commit stage are quality deals with real outcomes behind them, and the result is an on-target forecast their CFO trusts.

Charge for answers, absorb what you can reuse

Charge when the customer is buying the answer to a real uncertainty, whether that is the accuracy they need, the quality of their data or a difficult integration. Price the answer rather than the engineering days, and agree the production terms before the proof starts, or you will finish the technical diligence for a customer who never accepted your economics.

Absorbing the deployment has more variables than it looks: the cost of the engineers, the license structure and how the revenue is recognized. When ServiceNow put its own deployment engineers into large deals in its third quarter, part of the contract value moved from subscription revenue to professional services, trimming reported subscription revenue by about 25 basis points in Q3, with

about 50 expected in Q4. Its CFO said the company doesn't expect to include that delivery expertise over the long term, and the value returns to subscription when those contracts renew. Bundling engineering into a deal changes how revenue is recognized as well as what it costs. Under a consumption license, you only recover the deployment as usage ramps, which is why finance belongs in the offer before it goes out.

Before approving the engineers, ask finance two things: how much of the first-year contract this deployment consumes, and when you earn it back. When those numbers work, absorb the cost for work that makes the next sale easier: a connector other target customers need, a workflow you will sell again, an evaluation method that shortens the next buying decision. The question for the CEO is what we can sell or deploy faster after this account that we couldn't before, and if the answer is nothing but a happy customer, price it as custom work or walk away.

Then hold the deployment leader to two results: did the customer get the promised outcome, and did we get better at delivering it again? Track time to production, engineering effort per deployment and how much of the work was reusable, because a growing pipeline can hide a growing delivery obligation.

Competing with a bigger vendor

Go after the targeted solution you offer and where you best win, rather than trying to match a bigger vendor's breadth. When a bigger vendor includes its engineers, include your standard deployment in a committed contract and compare the same production scope. Name the team, the scope and the delivery commitment the buyer gets from you, and keep the conversation on how your solution best solves for the customer's outcome. Sierra built its model around that, pairing every customer with a dedicated agent development team and tying what it charges to outcomes.

Before your engineers go in

The customer commits to budget, sponsorship and working with your organization, and you know what a successful deployment earns you as well as what it costs. You can choose to absorb the cost of deployment, but never absorb the customer's indecision.

This advice isn't only for AI. It's the same thinking I've used leading sales teams to deliver, and what's new is how we apply it now that buyers expect engineers included. That's why I never let our engineers be priced like a commodity: their time goes where the customer has committed.

I've worked side by side with many engineers, and the value they bring to a client implementing the product goes past the install: they bring the learnings back to make the solution more useful

for that client and many others, and most know just the right expertise to apply. Leading the sales teams those engineers worked alongside is where I learned where that value belongs in a deal and how to advise my team.

The winning deployment is the one that gets the customer into production, builds a durable commercial relationship and makes the next customer easier to win.

At The Revenue Layer, I work with enterprises, early-stage companies and investors on exactly these calls: how to price and package deployment, when to put engineering into a deal, and how to build the go-to-market around it. More on that work, and my earlier pieces, at therevlayer.com.

Jen Viens is Founder of The Revenue Layer, providing fractional CRO leadership and commercial advisory to enterprises, early-stage technology companies and investors.

Sources

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