

# LATERAL THINKING

When you're selling a wide range of data management technologies it pays to see the big picture, as Gary West has demonstrated at Sybase *BY MARC BEISHON*



**S**ybase is one of the pioneers of the relational database world, and quickly gained a reputation for having a superior offering to its arch rival, Oracle, but of course history tells us that it is marketing hype that often leads to greater success. Sybase also ran into trouble in the 1990s, losing even more market share and parted ways with Microsoft over the joint SQL Server, but still turned in a billion dollars at one stage. In recent years, it has diversified into all manner of data integration and middleware tools, and notably into mobile systems, and lately has delivered some of its best ever figures as it reaches again for that benchmark \$1 billion turnover.

Much of the success has been quiet, with a strategy of operating below the radar – often working with OEMs to get its technology into large accounts – and it is no accident that last year it selected Gary West as UK country manager, as he was instrumental in engineering a major turnaround in the territory's balance of power.

“I was recruited in 2000 to run a partner sales operation that was contributing 10-15% of revenues – by the time I moved up it had grown to about 65%,” he says. “I pointed out to partners that by using our software they didn't need to reinvent the wheel or run the risk of being replaced by a major competitor.”

West certainly found a sweet spot with Sybase's data and application integration software – in his last year in the partner role he made president's club as the best worldwide sales manager with a 216% OTE, while he also had the top

worldwide salesperson under his wing, who made 238%. With a strong focus on sales methods and finding repeatable business, he was promoted ahead of colleagues on the direct side and external candidates to run the UK.

The UK operation he now runs is primarily concerned with core enterprise infrastructure. In 2000 Sybase also created a subsidiary, iAnywhere, to develop mobile enterprise offerings and last year it set up another mobile oriented subsidiary, Sybase 365, after acquiring Mobile 365 (both are run by other directors in the UK). There have been a fair few acquisitions in recent years as it builds out its “unwired enterprise” strategy and the company looks quite complex – there are dozens of products listed on its website (and even more that are “archived”).

Anyone meeting West, however, will soon be given simple, down to earth messages. Proud of a working class background in Bournemouth, he took his values from his father, who is still working as a plasterer in his 70s. “At 16 I joined a local typesetting firm as an apprentice, making my way to sales and sales management via production and customer service.”

It was a grounding in process that has served West well in sales, as it was an industry where fast, efficient turnaround was key, and the firm also developed into a software vendor with a typesetting system. That spurred him into a move to IT sales proper, at a start-up firm, itChannel International, also based in Bournemouth, and he did not spend long as a rep before moving back into sales management.

“I prefer management – if I assess my skills I think I’m very good at getting teams firing on all cylinders, finding out what people’s skills are and identifying with them where their best opportunities lie. But I’m also very strict about forecast accuracy, account planning, close plans and the like – and I don’t see them as difficult to do as long as you have something to say.”

### Management style

He considers there are essentially four types of sales management – “First, there’s the big bang approach, where you do lots up front then nothing for a few months – that doesn’t work as things are forgotten when the reps get out the door. Or you can do nothing and lose control. Then there’s the continuous campaign, where you’re speaking to people sometimes several times a day – but it’s admin heavy and counter-productive. Or you can take what

## *‘For 75% of your time if you’re not building pipeline you’re closing business – I do recognise people have to sleep’*

– GARY WEST

I prefer, a pulse approach – doing small pieces on a regular basis and tune in and out when necessary. As a result my meetings tend to be very short.”

At itChannel, West and colleagues had to do a good deal of lateral thinking – as he says, few top IT salespeople were attracted to a small firm in Bournemouth. He became adept at spotting talent from unlikely sources – finding in one case a clerk at American Express who went from earning £9k to £100k in a year, and taking on someone working in IT sales recruitment who won a big Microsoft migration project at Lloyds TSB. Both of these salespeople were women – and he has another rising female star at Sybase – but unlike some sales heads we have interviewed, West feels that only aptitude and attitude matter – not gender.

“I also worked with a great marketing brain, Jeremy Baldwin, and we built a sales methodology based on ‘time is money’, allocating time that internal sales should be spending on lead generation and the time that senior salespeople should be spending on front-line selling.” His measure of productivity now at Sybase is quite extraordinary – he aims for 75% activity on prospecting and selling for salespeople, which is way above measures achieved in most industries.

The deal he recalls as a standout at itChannel was also out of the ordinary – “It was an Ethiopian irrigation scheme in conjunction with an engineering firm and the World Bank – we won that by being flexible – if they wanted pencils we supplied them – but we drew the line at tractors and speedboats.” Such adaptability is also a feature of Sybase, he adds, with a “soup to nuts” approach with the technology, and close relationships between senior managers that can short circuit lengthy sales cycles.

In 1998, West left for a posting abroad,

with ERP distributor Advanced Business Systems, finding himself in Dubai. “I settled in well because we’d had students from Arab countries staying with us at home learning English,” he says. “But I had a lot to do to change the salespeople out there from just hoping prospects would like their software to a top down identification of budgets, pain points and decision makers.” Another extraordinary deal for West was in Khartoum, where he sold an ERP system into a totally green field site – a cigarette plant that had no back office computers at all.

Headhunted for the partner sales role at Sybase, he first had to overcome the lack of sunshine back in Maidenhead, and then spent a couple of years finding the best business approach and shape for his team (managing some reps remotely in Germany was not easy, for example, and he retrenched into the UK only). As for the plan, West focused his efforts on the OEM community, finding low hanging fruit in applications such as end of day reporting that needed refreshing thanks to ever increasing data volumes, with financial services a key market.

“The partner eco-system has changed for firms like Sybase that have leading edge software – it’s just too flat to rely on traditional distribution and reseller

### About SYBASE

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**BACKGROUND:** Sybase bills itself as “the largest enterprise software and services company exclusively focused on managing and mobilising information” and of course makes much of its database pedigree. The mobile middleware arm, iAnywhere, was set up in 2000; recent acquisitions include Mobile 365, AvantGo, XcelleNet and Extended Systems; 2006 saw a data integration suite launch.

**PRODUCTS:** Database management, data integration, analytics, data warehousing, mobile enterprise, RFID, metadata, application development, industry solutions (eg financial services).

**TURNOVER:** \$876 million in 2006.

**CUSTOMERS:** Addison Lee, Avis Europe, Barclays, Citigroup, Goldman Sachs, Mott McDonald, Nomura, Reality Group, RelQ Europe, Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust, Transport for London, United Utilities, Volvo.



models,” says West. What he has engineered is a model for engaging partners at both strategic and street levels using a combination of his partner team and now the direct salesforce, which also gets compensated through working with VARs. The idea is to eliminate channel conflict, which is still very much around, according to West, and to create more opportunities for repeatable business through any way that Sybase can be involved, from totally invisible – embedded in an OEM’s solutions – to leading a direct campaign.

“We are working ‘under the lid’ in some major organisations – we are not trying to hide anything but we can’t talk about some deals as we are giving the OEMs competitive advantage. But we are the underpinning technology in some of the biggest world IT deals. I picked up the message early on that partners could call it their own or not as they liked.”

The first major partner he built up in this way, working in network management, has grown from nothing to a \$2 million a year stream, and West put in place field sales and marketing plans, a rolling pipeline and defined sales stages, and involved pre-sales.

He built his partner group to a “lean and mean” team of five – and won that top sales manager’s award after exceeding target every year and building a business worth well over \$10 million. He took over both OEMs and VARs in 2006, and was then promoted to UK regional director. He took over from a director who had been running the direct salesforce – now West has the entire sales effort to run (the partner team via a “dotted line”).

“We have split the direct salesforce into two areas – financial services and cross-industry, which is telco, government, retail and so on – anything outside financial services. We have long standing direct and

partner relationships with banks and other financial institutions, and we have specific, data intensive applications that apply only to this sector.” He adds that he can see a need for specialist corporate governance sales – “We are looking at someone handling this.”

The direct salespeople work with VARs via a double compensation structure, and the partner team also looks after top level relationships with companies such as Morse and BT, two of Sybase’s primary UK partners. “We have a strong qualification process that has led us to few VARs – we are not churn and burn, and we look for board level commitment and the ability to think laterally.”

West says he has seen a ramp up in sales productivity since he’s been knitting partner management more closely into the overall effort. Sybase uses Salesforce.com, which West says is “superb for drilling down into the areas I need to see. The ethos is, for 75% of your time if you’re not building pipeline you’re closing business – I do recognise salespeople have to sleep sometimes.”

### Keys to performance

He considers that salespeople should be measured across a series of key performance indicators, not just closing. “I don’t believe in bluebird deals that come out of nowhere. They were always there – we just didn’t know about them.” Of paramount importance – and an activity that Sybase has spoken publicly on – is forecasting. “I have strict guidelines on pipeline – if it’s suspect it’s 150 days out, a prospect is 120 days, and anything in the current quarter is either best case or commit. There is no pipeline in the current quarter – just probability of closing. By the second month everything has to be commit or closed, or it’s pushed out to the next quarter.”

Add revenue, funnel/Salesforce.com usage and team quota to forecasting brings up 80% of a salesperson’s KPIs, the remainder comprises factors such as customer satisfaction and marketing initiatives. Meanwhile West has the kind of time based matrix for both inside sales and field sales that maps out activities by prospects and customer numbers – it looks easy to understand, and presumably is proving to be effective.

If salespeople have done the groundwork – using tools such as TAS for more complex deals – they should not find it hard to add the detail he needs to see in deal progression. But as he points out, you do need to be a good lateral thinker to use a tool like TAS – it won’t do the job for you.

West says many of his salespeople are long-standing performers – “One guy who’s hit club 12 years running has been here 17 years” – and big ticket, multi-million dollar deals are still possible – one such was recently brought in a quarter early and involved two partners.

The company has, however, been rolling out refresher training, using a firm called Basho Strategies, which has now set up a London office – the two modules taken up were “the winning call” – getting around gatekeepers and building rapport, which involves phone calls to real prospects during the training session, and “action is power” – techniques for emails and phone calls that get results. As a typesetter who could once do 20,000 keystrokes an hour, West appreciates effective presentation.

He looks for salespeople who “aren’t afraid to talk to customers in lateral terms” – but certainly doesn’t want people who are too consultancy led, who “chase an idea into a corner and don’t see the big picture”. He mentions that Sybase is not a brand you see plastered all over airport lounges – some people do like the clout this can bring – but says that his marketing team are good at teasing out sharp messages for a targeted audience.

He’s still keen to take on people who have not sold before, such as his rising female star whom he coached into taking on the partner run rate business, and she turned in 116% in her first year, identifying issues such as common reporting requirements in the reinsurance market – just the sort of exponential, repeatable growth he’s looking for from his sales eco-system.

Sadly, such repeatable growth has not been forthcoming on the golf course, where he is a keen player, and at AFC Bournemouth. But his employer hasn’t let him down and he’s keen to keep on repaying the faith – “If you cut me open you’ll read Sybase” – and there’s something about this firm’s culture that’s worth checking out. **SF**