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Opening Minds and Closing Sales

Getting reluctant prospects to make a decision.

I recently received an e-mail from a Link & Learn reader asking this question: *“Reps want to give up after making 20 (could be 50) calls to a business and not seeing development in the relationship. What tactics can reps use to break the monotonous cycle of making weekly sales calls?”* I see this same phenomenon with some of our sales reps as well. I think of these as “Groundhog Day Calls,” they remind me of the great Bill Murray movie where everyday is an exact duplicate of the day before. I see reps who keep calling on the same prospects who keep telling them no over and over, essentially acting out the definition of insanity as, “doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.”

Why do reps continue to make these unproductive calls? I believe that reps continue to make these calls because they are easy and the prospect’s reluctance actually takes the pressure off of the salesperson. This may seem counterintuitive, but reps can become comfortable with the “nice no’s” they get from their “regulars.” The rep can accurately claim that they “are making the calls.” The predictable response from these accounts allows them to maintain their pride because they are “making an effort” and to shift the blame for their failure to achieve their goals onto the prospect.

While I commend the persistence of reps who make 20 calls (or 50), I doubt the sincerity of their belief in making the sale. I find that many reps will continue making these calls long after they are convinced that the prospect “will never buy an ad.” I have also noticed that there is a direct relationship between the personality of the prospect and the number of times a rep calls on them. Prospects who like to talk and may even offer the rep a cup of coffee see reps much more frequently than prospects that are not as sociable. Before they can convince a prospect to buy, the sales rep must be convinced that the prospect will buy; being a “professional visitor” is nothing but a waste of time.

What are you trying to do?

In a perfect world, every call would be a one call close. The prospect would listen to your information, see the value of advertising and purchase a program—“Bada bing—bada boom!” In the real world, most sales require multiple calls to close. While our primary goal should always be to sell an advertising program, we should never settle for anything less than an “Advance.” An advance takes you a step closer to making

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a sale. Ernest Hemingway once said, “Never mistake motion for action,” when selling advertising we should never “mistake making calls for an advance toward a sale.” Simply calling on a customer without having an objective may actually hurt your chances of making a sale. You can wear out your welcome by wasting the customer’s time without giving them anything in return. To make an “advance” one or more (preferably all) of the following things must happen:

- You learn something about the customer’s business—we sell advertising solutions to a customer’s business problems. Before we can recommend a good program, we must have a through understanding of a customer’s situation. Prospects will be much more likely to buy a program that has been custom tailored to fill their specific needs. This also allows us to talk to the customer in their own language.
- You educate the prospect about your products—The more a prospect knows about your products and how you can help their business to succeed, the more likely they are to advertise with you. Though prospects can look at our papers or visit our websites they may not understand how many readers you have or the reach of your products. These intangible factors are hard for prospects to grasp and you need to reinforce your message every time you interact with a potential advertiser.
- You build trust—Trust is the key to making any sale. Before they will risk their hard earned money with you or your paper, they must feel they can trust you. You build trust by living up to your commitments, by doing what you say. If you promise to do something for a customer, make sure you live up to your commitment and that you do so in a timely manner. Use testimonials from current advertisers and research to prove the value of your product. On every call, give the prospect one more piece of evidence that your products will deliver as promised.

Strategy versus Tactics

In warfare, tactics win battles and strategy wins wars. Strategy is “big picture” thinking; every move a good strategist makes contributes to achieving their ultimate goal. Instead of making the same call over and over, the smart sales person makes strategic calls that bring them ever closer to making a sale. Here are some strategic sales techniques you can use to win over prospects:

- Gather Intelligence—Learn as much as you can about the account. Research them and their industry online. Use this information to develop questions to ask the prospect when you call on them. Use this information to reveal “hot button,”

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issues which are a great value to the prospect. You can use this information to heighten a prospect's interest in advertising with you. It is important to keep good notes on your interactions with the customer. Your notes from one call will provide a starting point for the next call, "Mr./Ms. Prospect, the last time we talked you mentioned XYZ, I'd like to explore this further," or "Mr./Ms Prospect, the last time we talked you mentioned XYZ, I'd like to show you something my artist and I came up with to help you with that..."

- Catch them by surprise—Robots are great for putting wheels on Fords in Detroit, but they make terrible sales people. Robots do the same thing over and over, sales people should always offer something new. If you talked to a prospect about advertising in your paper on the last call, talk to them about a special section, or online advertising, or inserts, or whatever you can sell them this time. If you use the same approach every time, the customer will switch off their brains because, "They've heard this all before." I was once on a call with a rep that made so many calls on a tanning salon that they were on a first name basis. We walked in and he asked, "Have you given any thought to advertising in my paper?" She said no and he turned around to go. I asked the client, a tanning salon owner, what she thought about our new front page coupon product. She told me she hadn't seen it and this led to a discussion of the product and a sale. Customers see a lot of salespeople and just like us; they get bored by an unchanging routine. By constantly showing them something new, we will maintain their interest.
- Reward them for their time—Nothing is more valuable than a customer's time. If they are willing to give us some of their day, we should give them something in return. While bribing a customer is expensive and unethical, you can give them something even more valuable to them—information and ideas. I like to provide potential clients market data from our audits. Small business people are always interested in what is going on in their market and who their customers are. You can also give them new marketing ideas to help them grow their business. My quote of the week started out as a way to keep my name in front of my customers and prospects and to give them something of value. I would look up a motivational quote each week and distribute it as a "value added" service to the people I wanted to do business with. If you are asking for a customer's time and attention, you must leave them with something of value.



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The last ditch attempt

I do not believe we should never write off any potential advertiser as a lost cause, but at some point we need to move them to the back burner. If you have made every effort to sell a prospect without making any progress, your time will be better spent calling on customers who are more likely to buy. You should still call on them occasionally, but regular calls are not likely to produce results. Before taking this drastic step, I make one more call on the prospect and tell them this: *“Mr./Ms. Prospect, I feel I’ve let you down. Based on my experience with businesses like yours I’m sure my paper would bring in a lot of customers for you. I’ve picked up a number of new advertisers and my schedule no longer will allow me to see you on a regular basis. Before we move on I was wondering if you could help me. Can you tell me where I went wrong? Are there any questions that I didn’t answer for you?”* This technique helps break down the wall between you and the customer. I have used it to learn the customer’s true objection and it has resulted in a sale on numerous occasions. I use this technique when I have nothing left to lose.

Conclusion

Charles F. Kettering said: *“Today we can send a message around the world in one seventh of a second, but it can take years to drive an idea through a quarter inch of human skull.”* Unfortunately there is no magic technique to make every customer instantly see the value in advertising. Selling requires both quantity and quality. A customer’s resistance is seldom overcome by simply making lots and lots of calls. To win over the tough prospects you need to think strategically about your approach and persistently advance toward your ultimate goal of getting through that quarter inch of skull to sell an advertising program.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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