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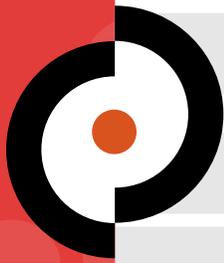
Stealth Selling

This past week I called on one of my company's new advertisers. As soon as I arrived, the customer dropped what he was doing to talk to me. He offered me coffee and introduced me to his entire staff. After a few minutes of friendly conversation, he suggested we go to lunch. We talked over our meal and the customer insisted on picking up the check. At the end of the meeting, the customer purchased a digital product I had proposed, significantly increasing his investment with my company. I pinched myself several times during the call to make sure I wasn't dreaming, but this call was a real world event. The secret to my success was that I wasn't on a "sales" call. My ostensible reason to visit the customer was to interview him for a short feature on his business, a service we offered him to land the account. Since I was there as a "reporter," many of the walls customers erect to keep sales people at bay, simply weren't there and I was able to quickly engage him in a meaningful conversation about his business.

Warning! Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!

Our prospects and customers are constantly besieged by people trying to sell them things. Many of these so called sales people are very bad at their jobs. They waste the customer's time and offer them nothing of value. In short order, most business owners develop an instinctive aversion to sales people. Just seeing a sales person walk into their business triggers a "talk to the hand... I'm not interested... don't let the door hit you in the backside" reflex. Though you may be a true consultative sales person with a genuine interest in helping your customers, the customer has no way to know this about you. This is why cold calling is such a challenge and good relationship building skills are so important to success in sales. Even once you have established a level of trust with an advertiser, they will continue to be a little wary. The customer knows that you earn your living by getting them to spend their hard earned money. I perform a number of functions for my company's sales people and their customers. In addition to sales training, I conduct and present market research, speak at business functions on behalf of the company, and write feature articles and advertorials. I've found that advertisers react to me in very different ways depending on which "hat" I happen to be wearing when we meet. If I am on a call with a rep, they see me as a salesperson. When I am speaking at a Chamber of Commerce function, I am seen as an "expert." When I am presenting market research, I am a consultant and when I am writing a favorable story about their business, I am the "BFF." While I am proud to be a sales professional,

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this experience has taught me the benefit of stepping outside of the sales role to engage customers. I've found by taking off my "sales hat," I can connect with customers on a personal level and build relationships with them; by tearing down some of the barriers they put up to protect themselves from sales pitches. I've found that customers are much more forthcoming about their business and the challenges they face. Ironically, some of my "non-sales" activities have laid the foundation for some very large sales. The following paragraphs list just a few ideas for stepping outside of the traditional sales role.

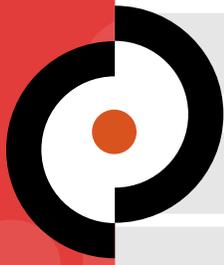
Speak your mind

Podiums are magical structures; they make anyone who stands behind them an instant genius. Whoever stands behind the podium is seen as an important person and someone worthy of our attention. This is why I recommend that every salesperson seek out opportunities to speak to business and community groups in their area. Chambers of Commerce, Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, etc. are often looking for someone to address their meetings. Doing this establishes you as an expert in your field and allows you to network with local business and community leaders. I have often met and talked with people at these events who have refused to grant us an appointment to discuss advertising. These encounters frequently are the start of a profitable business relationship. Preparation is the key to making the most of these opportunities. Plan and rehearse what you are going to say. If you do not feel comfortable speaking in public, find someone in your company who is willing to take on this role. Choose a subject of interest to your audience. Do not deliver a 15 or 30 minute commercial for your company. Giving a speech about how great you and your company are, will be seen as self serving. Your speech should benefit your audience. Be sure to network with the attendees before and after your speech.

Those who sell—teach

As advertising sales people, we have to become experts in a variety of subjects: selling skills, marketing, customer service, time management etc. This expertise can be leveraged to build relationships and to position your paper as a leader in the market. One of our sales people was dealing with a customer who was considering pulling his advertising. The customer, a window and roofing contractor, felt that his advertising was not generating enough leads for his sales people. The rep had noted that the customer's office staff had very poor telephone skills. We went to the customer and offered to give his staff a seminar in telephone sales skills and customer service. We did this at the customer's

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office early one morning. His staff, which had never had any sales training, enjoyed the training and were eager students. It is hard to say if our training helped the customer secure more appointments, but it did help us keep the advertiser's business. He greatly appreciated our efforts on his behalf. I have delivered training on a variety of subjects for clients over the years. Other than a small investment in time, this costs my company very little, but customers see this as a significant benefit. From time to time we offer free seminars on what is happening in the market or on some aspect of business. Our reps deliver invitations to their advertisers and prospects and we offer a continental breakfast. We recently did a seminar on e-mail marketing, which just happens to be a service we offer. Though we were careful not to make the presentation a sales pitch, we did offer a "seminar attendee special" at the end of the program. This resulted in sales totaling several thousand dollars before the customers left our conference room. You may also want to partner with local chambers or other business groups to deliver seminars.

Be a good citizen

Taking an active role in local community groups is one of the best ways to build your business network. As the old saying goes, "if you want something done, ask a busy person." This is why these groups typically attract the most successful local business people and the leaders in the community. Simply paying your dues and attending the occasional meeting is of little value, you must be active in the organization. Volunteering for committees and helping out during the organization's events gives you the opportunity to work side by side with potential customers. They have a chance to see that you are committed to helping the community and that you are reliable. If you work with someone on Saturday handing out water bottles at a local 5K, they are likely to talk to you when you call on them Monday morning. Your paper may want to partner with local charitable organizations. One of our sales people is passionate about helping abandoned animals. She approached the local shelter about putting out a flier featuring the pets they had available. They allowed her to use their name to approach local businesses to sponsor the flier. She now does a monthly flier featuring adoptable pets on one side and the sponsoring business on the back. This is a win-win-win; it benefits the shelter, gets the sponsors' names out and associates them with a good cause, while providing a steady source of revenue for the rep.

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Help them connect

As advertising sales people, we get to know most of the businesses in our territory. We know where to go if you need your house painted or a good dentist. We can use this information to forge stronger relationships with our clients. If a customer tells you she is planning to remodel her beauty salon, offer to introduce her to your accounts that may be able to help her. You help both parties by doing this. The salon owner finds a local contractor to help her spruce up her shop and the contractor gets an opportunity to make some money. Both customers will be grateful to you for helping them connect. You want your customers to see you, not as “just a salesperson,” but rather as a valuable resource. One of our inside salespeople sends out a bi-monthly online newsletter to all her clients and prospects. She includes upcoming presentations and specials she may have to offer. Most of the newsletter is made up of business tips gleaned from the web and facts about the market. She also includes the contact information of new businesses opening in the area. She has had several calls from potential advertisers who had been forwarded her newsletter. The newsletter told them that she knew her business and could help them accomplish their goals.

If the front door is locked, use the backdoor

Using the techniques above doesn't eliminate the need to make cold calls. It does give you another way to reach potential customers. Because this takes a lot of work and it is sometimes difficult to see how doing them relates to your bottom line, many people will not make the effort. This is why this is a good competitive strategy. True winners are the people who do the things that others are unable or unwilling to do. By taking off your “sales hat,” you open doors that would remain closed if you only use traditional sales approaches. Using these “stealthy” methods will let you talk to the customer before they have a chance to “shoot you down.”

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

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