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50 Ways to Reach a Buyer

The problem is all inside your head, my sales manager said to me.

The answer's easy if you take it logically.

I hope my meaning won't be lost or misconstrued.

It's really not my habit to intrude.

I'd like to help you in your struggle to make a sale.

But there must be fifty ways to reach a buyer.

Make a personal call...Paul,

Get on the phone ...Joan,

E-mail'em...Liam,

Put something in the mail...Gale.

Send a text...Rex,

There must be fifty ways to reach a buyer.

(With apologies to Paul Simon)

This month's Link & Learn takes a different tack than most of my previous columns. Instead of looking at the content of the message this month we'll look at the means of delivering a sales message to our customers. The fundamental job of a sales person is to communicate the value of our products to buyers to persuade them to buy advertising. I've worked in advertising since about 10 B.C. (Before Computers), as a young salesperson I had three options to reach my customers. I could visit the customer, I could dial (and I do mean dial) them on the phone or I could mail them. The advance of technology in the intervening decades has provided today's sales people with many more ways to deliver their message to buyers. There are advantages and disadvantages to using each of these modes of communication and this is what we will discuss in this month's column.

Make a personal call...Paul

The oldest way to deliver a sales message is indisputably still the best way.

No technology will ever take the place of meeting with a customer face to face.

Visiting a prospect's place of business engages all of our senses. Before we introduce ourselves to the owner, we can learn a lot about their business. The displays and signage offers clues about what is important to them. This visual information is invaluable in crafting an opening statement and knowing what questions to ask.

A field call also gives us an opportunity to gather information about the customer's personality. Human beings are a very social species, our brains are hard wired to sense the "signals" another person sends off and to quickly make a "friend or foe" judgement about them. A customer's body language will tell us if they are receptive to our message or are annoyed by our presence. Their faces will tell us if what we are saying resonates with them. This visual feedback allows the salesperson to customize their presentation for each individual customer.

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Of course, while we are sizing up our customers, they are doing the same to us. In spite of the oft repeated proverb, “you can’t judge a book by its cover,” we all use first impressions to determine how we feel about the people we meet. Malcolm Gladwell describes this phenomenon in his best-selling book **Blink**. This is why it is important to project a positive image when meeting with a customer. Though contemporary culture leans toward casual dress, research indicates that sales people and leaders who dress in more formal business attire are perceived as more professional, more knowledgeable and more trustworthy. Even casually attired prospects assign more credibility to a sales rep in business attire. This carries over to your sales materials. The wear and tear of making sales calls can quickly give our business cases, binders and presentation materials a ragged, shopworn appearance. We should take the same care of our materials as we do of our personal appearance.

Our body language makes up a big part of how prospects perceive us. We should be ever conscious of how we move and stand in a customer’s presence. Even when we are beat after a long day of sales calls, we cannot afford to slouch or to project anything but a powerful, positive aspect. Get a good book on body language (**What Every Body is Saying** by Joe Navarro, **Presence** by Amy Cuddy) and practice presenting yourself in a positive way. Given the many advantages of presenting materials visually, I am surprised by the number of reps who don’t use presentation materials with them on calls. Every sales person should carry a presentation binder with them. Research indicates that using visual materials in conjunction with a verbal presentation greatly enhances the prospect’s retention of your message.

The biggest problem with making field sales calls is that they are time consuming. Ultimately, we only get paid for the conversations we have with customers about advertising. Unfortunately, the amount of time we spend with prospects is small compared to the amount of “windshield time” we spend between calls. Couple this with the time we spend being stood up or getting interrupted and the actual time spent with prospects shrinks even further. It is vital that we maximize the time we get to spend with customers by arriving well prepared for our case. To minimize interruptions and to hold the attention of potential buyers, consider meeting with prospects outside of their business. An investment in buying the customer a coffee or lunch can pay dividends in the undivided attention and gratitude of a potential customer.

Get on the phone...Joan

The first technological innovation to impact the selling process was the telephone. Making phone calls is far more efficient than making field calls. You can contact ten customers in the time it takes to drive between sales calls. To get this gain in efficiency you must trade away some of the advantages of a face to face call. You lose the ability to gauge the prospect’s mood by their body language and to study the layout of their business. You can compensate for not seeing their shop by researching their business on the web. Good telephone salespeople are highly skilled listeners which helps them overcome not being able to observe the prospect’s body language. They listen to the tone the customer uses as well as to their words.

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When working on the phone, it is important to quickly engage the customer and to get into the discovery portion of the call. It is much easier to hold a customer's attention when you are in front of them than when you are on the phone. It is important not to waste the customer's (or your own) time. As mentioned above, visuals are an important part of the sales process. Today's phone salespeople have an advantage in that they can e-mail information to the client before or during the call. Some salespeople make use of Skype to try to replicate a face to face call. For formal presentations reps can use services such as GoToMeetings which allow them to share a PowerPoint with a client.

The advent of cellphones and then smartphones made reaching prospects by phone much more difficult. Caller ID makes people reluctant to answer a call from an unrecognized number. Phone contacts are most effective when used along with other modes of contact. A customer can be sold by a field sales rep and then serviced on the phone. Rather than visiting a customer every week to pick up ad copy and handle other routine tasks, a rep can save time by making a physical call once a month and using the phone in the intervening weeks. This has the effect of making the monthly call a time to discuss the client's needs and their need for additional advertising. The time saved can be used to acquire new customers. Canvassing new accounts by telephone can still be effective and the phone can be used to set appointments for field calls. This offers the efficiency of the telephone call with an outside salesperson's ability to engage the client.

E-mail'em...Liam; Send a text...Rex

Electronic messaging is the easiest and fastest way to reach customers—which can be a problem. The ease and familiarity (particularly for younger salespeople) of sending an e-mail or a text frequently means that they are often the default means of working with a customer. Mahatma Gandhi's warning, "*There is more to life than increasing its speed*" applies here. Electronic messages are an effective way to transmit factual information. They are far less effective at evoking an emotional response from an advertiser. Since most buying decisions are, at their core, an emotional decision, these "just the facts ma'am" messages are a poor way to motivate buyers. Electronic messages are a good way to confirm an appointment, or verify a copy point, but they are not a good way to get a customer to buy something. Many customers prefer to work with their sales rep via e-mail or texts on the grounds that this will save time. I suspect many customers also like to work this way knowing this is a good way to avoid a sales pitch. The impersonal nature of working with customers on the web is a barrier to building a solid client relationship. This makes it much easier for the client to cancel their program when money is tight. When dealing with a customer in person or over the phone you may sense some slight dissatisfaction in the customer's tone. This allows the rep to take proactive steps to remedy the situation before their dissatisfaction festers into a cancellation. I believe some reps rely on these digital tools to keep in touch with their customers because it is less risky. When they talk directly with a customer the rep needs to be upbeat ready to respond when they ask a difficult question or throws them an unexpected "curveball." Digital media provides

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a shield that protects them from having to deal with the unpredictability of human interactions in real time. While electronic messaging technologies are useful tools, they should never be the primary means of working with our customers.

Put something in the mail...Gale

Before FAX machines became popular in the 1980's, the only way to get something to the customer was to take it there yourself or to drop it in the mail. The advent of Faxes and then e-mail made mailing information obsolete. The volume of correspondence carried by the USPS is at an all-time low which offers an opportunity to use it to make an impression on advertisers. I encouraged my salespeople to send hand written thank you notes to their customers. Because few salespeople make the effort to do this, a rep who does so, stands out from the competition and leaves a positive impression in the customer's mind. I've seen many of these simple notes hanging from a client's wall years after they've received them. I've used this "horse and buggy in a Corvette world" approach to connect with hard-to-reach prospects as well. When a prospect refuses to take my calls and ignores my e-mails, I send them a package of information in the mail. Use USPS priority mail envelopes to do this. These cost just a few dollars to send and stand out in the prospect's mail, imparting a sense of importance and urgency to your message. A well written letter delivered this way will often prompt the client to call me when all else has failed.

There must be fifty ways to reach a buyer!

One of the many lessons I learned from my grandfather was "always use the right tool for the job!" My grandfather was talking about screwdrivers and wrenches, but his wisdom applies to the many communication tools available to salespeople today. The key to getting through to a customer and selling them is to "use the right tool for the job." Fortunately for today's advertising salespeople, "there must be fifty ways to reach a buyer!"

This article was written by Jim Busch.

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