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What Are Your Intentions?

One of the benefits of being a trainer is that I get to observe a lot of sales calls and to work with a lot of sales people. I work with about 40 inside and outside sales people who range in experience from 3 months to more than 3 decades. I work with classified reps on the phone, territory reps and with our major account team. My job also gives me a chance to work with all types of accounts. I've met with bank presidents in their corner offices and auto mechanics who crawled out from under a greasy car to talk about advertising. I have observed calls that went very well, some that ended very badly and many, many more that fell somewhere in between. By observing sales people in action I have been able to identify the factors that greatly increase a rep's chance of closing a sale. Among the most important factors in sales success is a clear statement of your intentions.

Simply stated, intention is having a clear understanding of what you want to accomplish in your meeting with the client. Of course your goal is always to sell advertising but this objective is far too general to be useful in specific situations. If you do not have a clear objective in mind, you are wasting your time and even worse you are wasting the time of your prospects and customers. I see far too many calls where the conversation with the client had no clear direction and was of no benefit to either party. Some reps I have been with even fall back to making small talk with the prospect. After a few minutes chatting about the weather or local sports the prospect begins to lose interest. A successful sales call leaves both the rep and the advertiser better informed. It is a sharing of information that leaves the rep with a better understanding of the prospect's business and leaves the business owner with a better understanding of your publication and how it may solve some of his/her problems. An exchange of valuable information engages the customer and begins building a strong relationship with the sales person. Sharing information allows you to partner with your customers to develop programs that not only benefit both of you but also offer benefits to your readers—a Win/Win/Win solution.

Before contacting a customer you must know what you want to accomplish. You should think about this before the call so that you can state your intention in a sentence. Since making a sale requires both a seller and a buyer, it is a good idea to share your intention with the prospect early in the call. Nothing is more valuable in business than time. In these days of tight budgets and short staffing, most prospects' time is stretched to the breaking point. By clearly stating your intention at the beginning of the call you let the customer know that you are there for a specific purpose and will not waste their time. Saying something like,

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“I was just in the area and thought I’d stop in, do you have a few minutes to talk?” sends the wrong signal and often brings the call to an abrupt end.

Your intention on an initial cold call is to simply gather information. In this situation I would begin a call by saying, “Hello, my name is _____, I work for the (Publication name) and we help many businesses in the area. I’m here to find out a little about what you do to determine if we can help you in any way. Can you tell me who is responsible for . . .” By stating that you are there to collect information blunts the initial objection, “We don’t want to buy anything.” This also puts you on record as being interested in helping them.

On a follow-up call your intention should be to advance the sales process toward a close. I’ve seen far too many reps do “Groundhog Day Calls”; these are calls that look and sound exactly like the previous call (*or the previous ten calls*)! Saying, “I just wanted to stop back and see if you’ve thought any more about advertising in my paper?” is not a sales call, it is a visit. Your intention on follow-up calls should be to give the client some more information that may tip the scales in your favor and to learn more about their situation. The more you know about them, the more likely you are to uncover a problem your paper can solve. Follow-up calls should start with a re-cap of what you’ve done up to that point, “Mr. / Ms. Prospect, when we met last month we discussed how slow business is at the beginning of the week.” This shows the customer that you are organized and reminds them why they should advertise. Now you are ready to state your intention on this call, “Based on what you’ve told me in our earlier meetings, I’ve put together some ideas that may build your traffic in the first half of the week. Today I’d like to review them with you and get your thoughts.” Reviewing the previous conversations with the customer builds a foundation for the follow-up presentation. It allows you to frame the customer’s problems in a way that you can address with your products. Stating your intention allows you to advance the process along a continuum moving toward a sale. Instead of constantly starting at home plate, this technique puts you on second or third base.

If you have a formal meeting with a customer, a written agenda is a powerful tool. An agenda keeps you focused on covering everything the customer needs to know. By proactively writing an agenda, you are able to control the direction and the content of the meeting. I will open the meeting with: “Mr. /Ms. Customer, I know that you are very busy and that building traffic is important to you. To save time and to make sure I answer all your questions, I’ve prepared a brief agenda for our meeting. Before we begin, is there anything you would like to add?” An agenda shows that you care enough about the customer’s business to be prepared and positions you as a professional. This is particularly important

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if the prospect is trying to choose between your publication and one or more competitors. Asking for the customer's input helps establish a proper relationship with the prospect. Instead of a sales person begging for their business, you present yourself as a professional "take charge" advertising consultant.

It is also important to discover and clarify the customer's intention. I have been on many calls where the customer wasn't quite sure what they wanted to accomplish. They may know they should advertise but are not clear what their message should be. Again, the direct approach is best. Simply ask the customer, "Before we discuss my products, I'd like to ask you what you want to accomplish by advertising, what are your goals?" If they give you a "fluff" answer such as "More customers" ask follow up questions to drill down to the specifics, "Who exactly do you want to reach?" or "What services do you want to promote?" Armed with this knowledge you will be able to tailor your presentation to the customer's needs. This information also helps to gain the customer's commitment. If the customer objects to your recommendation, you can respond: "Mr. /Ms. Customer you said that it is important to you to attract more business from north of the city. If you want to accomplish this you need to deliver your message to the homes in that area...wouldn't you agree?" If you and the customer clearly understand the goals and challenges their business faces, it will be much easier to gain their agreement on an advertising program.

Dr. Lawrence J. Peter once said, "If you don't know where you are going, you'll probably end up somewhere else!" This is certainly true on a sales call. By deciding exactly what you want to accomplish and communicating your intentions clearly to the client, you streamline the selling process. A clear statement of your goals trims the fat from your presentation and keeps you on point. Determining the customer's intentions permits you to zero in on the customer's needs and to solve their problems. Drifting through a sales call in search of something that may make the prospect want to buy an ad is counter productive. The best sales people know what they want to accomplish and know how to communicate their intentions to their clients. No one ever became a great sales person by accident. Before you can be truly successful you must know what you intend to do in order to get there.

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

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