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Take the inside track to more sales

Using inside sales to drive revenue.

The way we connect with other people has been changing ever since Samuel Morse tapped out his first telegraph message in his dot-dash code. Alexander Graham Bell's telephone brought instant communications into every home and business.

Today we are no longer tied to the world with miles of copper wire; we essentially hold the entire world in the palm of our hands. These advances in communications technology have radically changed our culture, sparking the growth of new industries and changing virtually everything we do. The most successful businesses are the enterprises which not only embrace these new technologies, but which develop ways to leverage them to generate revenues. In our industry, this means developing an effective inside sales department.

Anyone can take an order; it takes a pro to sell

In the past, inside sales people were little more than "order-takers." They were paid to answer the phone and handle inbound calls from customers. They handled very small orders handing off larger ads to the "sales people." Some companies had a "telemarketing" department to generate leads and sell classified ads. These people would "smile and dial" as many people as possible using a script in an attempt to generate new business. Some papers had "phone reps" who were given some training and were able to handle smaller accounts. This was seen as a low cost way to handle customers with limited potential.

The recession was a world changing event for the free and community paper industry. Profit margins became dangerously thin and publishers were forced to seek operational efficiencies to survive. The new economic reality and the advances in communications technology have led to the creation of the modern inside sales department. No longer seen as "second class citizens" or as mere order-takers, today's inside sales people are highly trained professionals. They are skilled at connecting with prospects, building trust and persuading them to purchase effective advertising programs. They pride themselves on building solid customer relationships and providing them with outstanding customer service. The technology on their desk allows them to serve many more customers spread out over a larger geographic area than the most energetic outside sales person could ever handle.

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I do not mean to imply that publishers should fire all of their outside sales people and bring all sales activities inside. No technology will ever replace the impact of personal contact in building trust with a new client. When a rep visits a customer they can look around and see what is happening in the business as well as show their products to the client. There will always be a role for outside sales people. Unfortunately, we can no longer afford to meet every advertiser at their place of business. The cost of sales is significantly lower for inside sales reps and inside sales people are able to deliver a higher level of customer service because they can respond to a customer's calls quicker than a rep on the road.

Qualities of great inside sales people

They are knowledgeable—Inside sales people must have a thorough knowledge of their products, sales techniques, and what is going on in the market. If multiple sales people share the sales room, they will learn from one another. This makes the inside sales department an excellent place for new sales people to learn their trade.

Good inside sales managers provide their people with frequent training opportunities and resources.

They ask great questions—Inside sales people have a very small window on the world of the customer. I sometimes compare their situation to the captain of a submarine, who is in the midst of a great ocean, but whose vision is limited to the tiny circle of sea in his periscope. Inside sales reps must use questions to gain an understanding of the customer's situation and needs. Since they seldom get to see the client's place of business, they must be skilled at seeing it through the customer's eyes.

They are good listeners—Inside sales people must listen very carefully to what the customer has to say about their business. They should take good notes and use the information to build a picture of the customer's situation. Inside reps should not only pay attention to the content of the conversation, but also to how it is delivered. The customer's tone, inflection and pacing is the inside sales person's equivalent of reading a customer's body language.

They are master communicators—One of the challenges of inside selling is that while most people take in most of their information visually, most inside selling is done with words. The best inside sales people use descriptive language and metaphors to help their clients visualize what they are selling. They leverage the technology whenever possible to put visuals in front of their clients. At my company our inside reps prepare

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visual aids for every product and special section we sell. These can be e-mailed to clients before or during the call. By having ready-made materials at hand saves time and ensures that a consistent message reaches the market.

They are power users of technology—Inside sales people are tied to their customers through technology. Good reps never make a cold call. They use their search skills to learn as much as possible about their prospect. They read their website and try to understand their business before making a call or sending an e-mail. When I ran an inside sales department, one of the most important measures of a rep's performance were call volume reports. Today these are becoming increasingly irrelevant because more and more customer contacts are made using e-mail and even twitter. Inside sales people must know how to use e-mail effectively. (Visit the Link & Learn archives at PaperChain.org for an article on using e-mail) Our inside team has a collection of well written e-mail templates which they use for this purpose. Some reps send out regular informative e-mail newsletters to maintain contact with their clients and deliver value to them. While e-mail and twitter are effective ways to communicate information, talking to the customer on the phone is the best way to persuade them to buy advertising with you.

They are well organized—Because they handle many customers, inside sales people must be well organized and effective time managers. They make good use of calendar tools and arrange their days so that they spend as much time in direct communication with customers as possible. I have noticed that the workspaces of great inside sales reps function like the cockpit in a 747. Everything the rep needs, all their customer files and sales materials are at their fingertips. Many inside sales people make a habit of setting telephone appointments with their clients. They devote time to customer research and to sales planning. They take a proactive approach to sales, reaching out to seasonal advertisers long before the products they need to use deadline.

They are resilient—There is more of everything in inside sales. Inside sales people contact more customers, make more presentations and handle more accounts than the typical field sales person. Naturally, this means they hear more “No's” than the average salesperson. It is far more easy to hang up on an inside sales person than it is to throw someone out when they are looking them in the eye. A downside of the technology is that it facilitates rudeness. This means that inside sales people often get a lot of abuse from prospects. They must possess a thick skin and rock solid self-esteem to absorb this treatment and jump back into the fray.

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Including inside sales in your business plan is an effective way to hold costs down, while expanding your customer base and growing revenue. To realize the full potential of an inside sales team they must not be seen as a sideline. Because they work from inside the office, there is a temptation to assign the inside sales function to clerical people or to assign clerical duties to the inside sales reps. Your inside sales people should spend the majority of their time contacting customers or planning. Inside sales are difficult and your compensation plan should be lucrative enough to attract and retain good people. They should be seen as partners, rather than adversaries of your outside sales team. Blur the lines between inside and outside sales, cross-training your field reps to effectively use the phone and allowing your inside people to make the occasional field call. As managers, we must deploy the resources available to us to their best advantage, to achieve the best possible return on our company's investment.

Conclusion

Early in my sales career I was told, "The more you tell; the more you sell!" This rule works as well today as it did when I first heard it more than three decades ago. A well trained, well organized inside sales department can "tell" your paper's value story to a lot of potential customers in the course of a week. By leveraging modern technology, an inside sales person can contact many more prospects than they could ever see face to face. Perhaps the old saying needs updating to: *"The more you call, fax, e-mail, and tweet: the more advertising your paper will sell!"*

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

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