

Follow-Up: The Sales Secret

There is a secret to sales success that is actually no secret at all...and yet somehow many companies fail to engage in it. Perhaps this is because it is so obvious as to be obscured by the busy flow of the daily work day. Perhaps it is hard to execute because we can't resist chasing new business. Perhaps some companies don't fully understand or believe in its efficacy. Yet follow-up is one of the most effective, cost efficient ways of boosting sales because it builds upon existing exposure, awareness, interest and relationships.

The temptation for most businesses is to constantly seek out new prospects, most likely because that is one of the ways sales forces are measured. By imposing this method of performance review, the company creates a sense of momentum, but may not be improving sales to the maximum extent it could be.

Follow-up is an excellent means of generating sales without the constant drain of resources that cultivating new prospects requires. Sure your company should always engage in targeting new companies. But this cannot, and should not, come at the expense of the potential companies already aware of your offering may be able to afford you.

Follow-up is easy to overpass in the rush to boost sales. It is easy to explain away the interest in a company that had the chance to buy from you and did not. Perhaps the company was not yet ready to buy. Perhaps the budget wasn't in place. Perhaps they did not yet fully recognize the need. Whatever the reason, the idea that someone who did not buy from you the first (or second...or third) time you tried to sell to them is not ever going to buy from you is incorrect. Moreover, it wastes, rather than builds upon, the investment you initially made to establish the contact.

Certainly not everyone you approach will want to buy from you. There are those who will never buy. But if you are selecting your targets properly, there are few who could never buy. You need to differentiate the two groups – those who will never buy and those who might buy – and focus on the “maybes”. The maybe group is always a stronger opportunity than the companies out there that have yet to be approached.

Follow-up is an uncomfortable process. Sometimes we feel like we are begging. Sometimes we feel like we are nagging. Sometimes (often), the person we need to speak to avoids us in the hope that we'll take the hint and simply go away. The lack of comfort in the follow-up process requires that we establish a follow-up routine that allows us to stay in front of prospects in an orderly, scheduled manner.

The follow-up schedule can serve a number of different functions:

1. It can serve to simply remind the prospect of the initial offer
2. It can remind the prospect of a specific set of skills or services your company offers
3. It can be used to send greetings and build a relationship
4. It can be used to share what you believe to be information of value or interest to the prospect

The channels you select to deliver your scheduled communications can (and should) vary. The channel selected can be influenced by the type of communication, using

certain channels to emphasize importance and response urgency. Another consideration in channel selection can be cost, using electronic delivery systems, for example, can be less costly than printing and mailing (of course, on the other hand, the “staying power” of an electronic communication is lower than one person can actually touch, feel, and leave on their desk).

The implementation of a scheduled follow-up program takes advantage of a number of events occurring throughout the year, such as holidays and industry events. You can use holidays to stay in front of prospects simply by sending your greetings and best wishes. Naturally you can also make a special offer to celebrate the holiday, but it isn't always necessary. The greetings often serve the purpose of bring you to mind, while you can then save the special offer for another time (and another exposure). The same is true for industry events, where you can mark conventions, trade shows, and other events by sending out notices of your participation, and perhaps an invitation to stop by. Certainly, you can also incorporate into your schedule a series of communications that are not related to an external event, but rather relay information you wish to share with your customers and prospective customers.

When you issue a special offer you can use follow-up as a means of increasing response. Your special offers can have a “limited time” element to them, creating both a timeframe within which prospective customers must respond and a structure within which you can measure that response. By taking the offer away, you have the option of bringing it back again, which in turn offers another exposure, but also a valuable follow-up tool. Certain prospects might not have taken advantage of your offer the first time around for internal reasons, and will welcome the opportunity to avail themselves of the offer when it returns. This creates goodwill, as customers feel they were given a second shot at an attractive deal. This may be borrowing from a marketing tactic, but it fits in the follow-up campaign as well.

Finally, executing an effective follow-up campaign is all about timing. You need to examine the buying seasons of your industry and make sure that your offers are consistent with buying habits. You also need to make sure that you strike the right mix of communication styles and delivery systems. Don't flood your prospects with information and contacts. Make sure your communications are meaningful, well intentioned, purposeful, and welcomed. You can preserve this balance by keeping greetings clean of offerings, and offerings focused on benefits. Over time you will find that your follow-up is increasingly sales considerably.

Most often we make a sales pitch and engage in some basic forms of follow-up. We send proposals and make some telephone calls. Maybe we even push for additional meetings. But rarely do we make sure that companies that turned us down get a second (or third, or fourth) opportunity to buy from us. Yet that is the essence of follow-up. Sure, you might be giving them the chance to turn you down a second (or third, or fourth) time, but it is the effort that they will remember. One day, if you stay in touch, they may just be ready to buy. Isn't that what sales is all about?