

Head Start Selling

One of the attendees at a recent seminar took me to task over the issue of cold calls. They're an absolute waste of time for a printing salesperson, he said. He personally gets all of his new customers from referrals, which he said is a much more "professional" way to sell.

Well, sure. I think all of us would like to have more of the head start you get with a referral, and less of the "start from scratch" selling that cold calling involves. But the issue to me is pretty simple...what do you do if you're not getting enough referrals to make you rich?

Ask For Referrals

One of the things you can do is to make it a point to ask for more referrals. Believe me, pretty much everyone you sell to—or are trying to sell to—knows someone else who buys printing. If you're willing to ask the question, you'll get some names.

I think there are two common factors, though, that hold salespeople back from asking for referrals. First, I think many salespeople—particularly those who have never had the benefit of working with an experienced full-time sales manager, a situation that probably describes most quick printing sales people—have forgotten all about the process and the benefits of gaining referrals. For many salespeople, it's something that was mentioned during the early days of sales training, but at that time, the salesperson didn't even have any customers! Who was he or she going to get these referrals from? The whole idea was placed on "the back burner" (where so many great ideas go to die, right?) And by the time the salesperson developed some steady customers, he or she had forgotten all about asking them for referrals.

If you fall into that category, I hope this will be your wake-up call!

Comfort Zone

The second factor holding salespeople back from asking for referrals is simply that many printing salespeople are uncomfortable asking the questions. In fact, I will admit that I often have been. That doesn't mean I haven't asked for referrals on many occasions, because I have. But I have had to push myself beyond a "comfort zone" to do it.

I really don't know why I felt that asking for a referral might cause a customer to like me less—or want to buy from me less! I'm sure that it's some common factor in human nature, though, because it seems to affect so many of us. So what did I find when I pushed myself to ask? For the most part, my customers suggested people for me to talk to. And in fact, in many cases, they seemed surprised that I wasn't already talking with other people in their organizations who bought printing. *"You're probably already talking to Jane Smith in Human Resources, right? You're not? Oh, you should definitely be talking to her! She's a good friend of mine, and she buys a lot of printing!"*

Now, there have been times when I have made the specific decision not to ask a certain individual for a referral, when I sensed that asking for the name of a colleague or friend to approach might somehow jeopardize a relationship I was trying to build. I don't think you should ask *everyone* for referrals, especially people who have no reason yet to *want* to help you out. But when you do develop a solid relationship with a customer, then it's usually appropriate to ask.

Think of it this way: A solid, steady customer already likes you. That's part of the reason any customer gives you—and keeps giving you—business! Offering that person a chance to provide a referral which might help you to improve your own situation might be thought of as giving him—or her—another way to show how much he or she likes you.

Cold Calls Do Work

Referrals can be extremely valuable to a quick printing salesperson, but the best news of all for today may be that there's another very good way to get printing buyers' names, along with some of that *head start* you'd get from a referral. You can get both of those things with a cold call...if you go about it right.

What do I mean by going about it right? I *don't* mean going out on cold calls with the objective—or expectation—of seeing decision-makers and making presentations. First of all, it's not realistic to expect that a high percentage of capable and competent buyers will invite you in and give you significant selling time on a cold call. (You might get in to see a better percentage of the bozo's who don't have anything better to do than to talk to walk-in salespeople, but I don't think *that's* very good use of your time.)

But that's OK, because I don't think cold calls are for selling anyway. I think they're for *research*. And because of that, I don't think you would really want to see the decision-maker on a cold call. Here's a basic part of my selling philosophy...you want to *sell* at as high a level as you can in any company, but you want to prospect and do your research at the lower levels.

Sell High, Prospect Low

My goal on a cold call is to get as much information as I can from the first person I meet, usually a secretary or receptionist. That person is called the *gatekeeper* in modern sales training jargon. What do I want to learn from that person? At the very least, I want to learn the name of the person I'm ultimately going to have to sell to at this place. But beyond that, I want to learn anything else I can that will help me to prepare for the actual selling effort.

I want to find out what sort of things they get printed on a regular basis, and get samples of those things if I can. I'd like to find out who the current printer is, and how many other printing salespeople might be knocking on this company's door. I'd like to find out if there's anything in the decision-maker's interests or personality that will indicate some common ground between us.

I've found that you can get a great deal of valuable information in a very short time from a secretary or receptionist—if you make it clear that a little bit of research is your only purpose. You'll bring out the worst in the typical gatekeeper if you go in *demanding* an opportunity to sell.

My approach has always been pretty straightforward. I tell the secretary/receptionist who I am, and that I want to send some information about my company through the mail to the person who buys the printing. I get the name *much* more often than not, I ask a few more questions, and I'm on my way.

Head Start

The net result of this kind of research can be very similar to the sort of head start you might get from a referral. Granted, you might not be able to say that "Frank said I should contact you" when you take the next step—which I think should be a letter, by the way, and not an immediate phone call—but you can say that you've visited his or her company on your own, and done some research to determine the likelihood of a fit between your companies. It's been my experience—and the experience of many other successful printing salespeople—that the really good printing buyers respond very well to that sort of "professionalism" on the salesperson's part.

Referrals are great if you've got 'em, and you can certainly get more of them if you're willing to ask. But if getting referrals is a problem for you in any way, there *is* an alternate route you can follow. I don't know too many printing salespeople who really like making cold calls, but I know quite a few who've made cold calls work for them. And I know more than a few who have become very successful, using cold calls *and* referrals as the twin foundations of a continuous process of identifying high-quality prospects and turning a fair percentage of them into high-quality/high-volume customers.