

I'm NOT All A'Twitter

The hot topic in sales training these days seems to be *Social Media Networking*. In fact, I've been turned down for several speaking engagements recently because that's what the organizers think their constituents want/need to hear about.

"Can you put a seminar together on how to use Facebook and Twitter in printing sales?" I've been asked?

"I could, but I won't," has been my answer. Why? Because printing salespeople are wasting enough time already without adding more to the mix.

Networking Good

Let me make this clear, I am not opposed to networking, in fact, I am a very strong proponent of this element of selling strategy. I have written before, though, that the most important part of networking is the *working* part, and that means two things. First of all, it means that you really have to *work* at it — showing up at a BNI meeting and describing your ideal customer and hoping for some referrals is not *networking*. Nor is showing up at a Chamber Mixer and chatting with a few people and exchanging business cards with a few others. *Networking* involves identification on two levels and follow-up on two more.

The first level of identification is to find people who work at companies or organizations that have enough print volume potential to make them worth pursuing. The second level is to identify the person you'll ultimately have to sell to.

The first level of follow-up involves your initial *networking* contact. If he/she is the person you'll ultimately have to sell to, it's to set up a meeting to talk seriously and in depth about his/her printing wants and needs. (Please note that it's unlikely that you can have that conversation in a networking atmosphere.) If he/she is not the person you have to sell to, the first level of follow up is to gain an introduction to the person you do.

The second level of follow-up is to identify that person's wants and needs and start the process of convincing him/her that you can meet or exceed them, and provide an improvement over the status quo.

Wasting Time Bad

My problems with Facebook and Twitter have nothing to do with the networking possibilities, which are very real. They have more to do with the *likelihood* that a salesperson will spend 20 minutes "socializing" for every minute of real sales-building activity, so unless all of the Facebook and Twitter time is put in after hours, I think it's pretty likely that some of the real selling hours of each day are going to be wasted. If you're the owner, do you want that to happen, either to yourself or to your sales employees? If you're one of those employees, here's the bottom line — are you in this to socialize, or to make money?

Wasting time is bad, right? Therefore, anything that makes it easier to waste time is also bad. We'll all be better off with sales and marketing strategies that *maximize* time rather than wasting it.

Real Possibilities

OK, having said all of that, Facebook and Twitter *do* have some real business-building possibilities. The most important thing to understand, though, is that these possibilities are connected to *them*, not to *you* — and by *them*, I mean your suspects, prospects and customers. For the life of me, I can't imagine why anyone would want to follow the life of a typical printing salesperson — or printing company — in 140 character installments. But by setting yourself up as a *follower* of people you're interested in, you can learn what *they're* interested in, helping you to establish the common ground that often leads to a successful business relationship. Facebook has the same limitations (except for the 140 character part), but provides the same opportunity.

Keep this in mind, though. What you're looking for is the most *eclectic* interest you share with a suspect, prospect or customer. Let me explain that a little further. You might never be more than *one of* the salespeople a buyer shares an interest in football with, but you might be the *only one* with whom he/she shares an interest in ballet or opera.

Keep this in mind too. With a high-value suspect, prospect or customer, it might be worth *learning something* about one of their most eclectic interests. In other words, to *create* some common ground that may not have existed before.

LinkedIn

While Facebook and Twitter are *social* networking media, LinkedIn was intended from the start as a *business* networking tool. In theory, you can establish a network that contains everyone you do business with, or would like to do business with. LinkedIn also gives you the ability to search on a variety of parameters. For example, I just searched “American Red Cross” for “marketing” titles within 50 miles of my zip code. The first listing that came up was their local Director of Marketing and Communications, and it turns out that she went to the same college my wife attended, at about the same time. We also have two other business connections — people in her network that I also know — and I’m reasonably sure that I could get one of those people to try to provide me with an introduction, based on my relationship with him. The only problem, perhaps, is his relationship with her. Does she know him/like him/trust him enough that she’d meet with me based on his recommendation?

I have used LinkedIn to look up companies that I’m interested in, to help me with that *first level of identification* I mentioned earlier. I have also used LinkedIn to learn more about people I’ve already identified, to see if I might have some network pathway to them. I’m looking for something that will increase my likelihood of making a connection, and ultimately selling something.

This is important, though, I don’t reach out to my suspects or prospects to say “we have a mutual friend/connection.” I reach out to the friend/connection to say “can you introduce me to this person?” As I’ve been writing and saying for years, the only thing better than a referral in business is an introduction!

Closing Thoughts

Here are today’s closing thoughts. There is some business-building potential in social networking media like Facebook and Twitter, and very definite potential in a business networking tool like LinkedIn. Like any other form of networking, though, it’s the *working* part that’s most important. Please don’t kid yourself into thinking that just because you’re “on” Facebook or Twitter or LinkedIn that you’re doing your business any good.

And don’t kid yourself about how much time you’re really spending on this stuff, or when you’re spending it. Thirty minutes of dedicated *networking* in the evening will probably put money in your pocket. An hour on Facebook during the *working day* probably will not.