TLC in TCM

In last month's QP, I started writing about the role of the telephone in contemporary quick printing sales. (The article was titled "Telephone Selling") As promised, I'm going to continue this month with more on that subject. I'll give you some thoughts on both telephone technique and telephone timing, and I also want to tell you about a software product that I use as the anchor of my own "telemarketing" efforts.

Staying In Touch

As I said last month, I believe pretty strongly that the only thing a quick printer can sell over the telephone is an appointment. I believe that the "convincing" part of selling is best done face-to-face. But the telephone is a great tool for staying in touch with established customers, and for executing a technique we can call "pro-active customer service."

First, though, a warning: I've been telling people in my seminars that my favorite commercial on television is one by United Airlines. You may have seen it, it's the one where a company's president walks into a staff meeting carrying a stack of airline tickets. He passes them out to the assembled group while explaining that "our biggest customer just fired us." The reason for the firing was too many phone calls and faxes, and not enough personal contact. This company is going to correct that situation with the rest of it's important customers before it's too late.

Not every one of your customers needs to see you on a regular basis. But you'd better make sure that you know which ones do. Contact equals confidence and continuity in the selling part of your business, and there are issues of *quality* of contact as well as quantity.

Set Schedule

If you're the owner or manager of the print shop, I think you'd be wise to establish a schedule for telephone contact, and by that I mean two things. First, a schedule that says you'll call certain customers and/or prospects every week, others every two weeks, others once a month or once a quarter. But also, a schedule that says you'll sit down to make phone calls every Tuesday and Thursday morning, or between the hours of 10:00 AM and 11:00 AM every day. Consistency is the key, and you'll have a much better chance at staying in consistent contact with your customers and prospects if you establish a discipline to make the calls in the first place.

How do you know how often to call a particular customer or prospect? Ask them! I've had a great deal of success in my own selling career by asking people "What's the best way for me to stay in touch with you without becoming a pain in the butt." Because that's an important issue! There can be a fine line between a contact level that will make you feel good, and one that will annoy a customer or prospect.

I've often told people that "I don't mind having you tell me that you have no need for me right now. I just want to make sure that I'm there when you *do* need me. That's why I want to call you on a regular basis."

Fresh Conversation

It will also be helpful if you have more to say on your contact phone calls than "Do you have anything that you need printed today?" Ask how the customer's business is going. Ask if the customer or prospect has any new products or services coming out. In other words, ask questions which will help you to learn more about your customer or prospect and his or her business, and which indicate that you're interested in the business—beyond just getting printing orders!

Another technique I've had success with is to "prime the pump" for a phone call by sending something in the mail. As an example, you might send out a few samples demonstrating the capabilities of a color copier, and then follow up on that on your next regular contact call. This may not be a technique you can apply to all of your customers and prospects, but how about trying it out with a few selected companies in the next month or so.

Pro-Active Customer Service

Pro-active customer service is a term that can have two meanings for you. On one hand, it can mean a program by which your customer service/counter salespeople can be given some of the responsibility for telephone contact. I see no reason why these employees can't be assigned to call certain customers at regular intervals. It may not be possible to schedule specific times during the day or week for them to engage in telephone activities, but it should certainly be possible to assign some number of people to be called each week as time allows.

This strategy can be especially appropriate for launching a program to get in touch with people you haven't seen or heard from for a while. The message of the phone call can be as simple as that: "We haven't heard from you in a while. We've enjoyed working with you in the past. What can we do to rebuild a relationship?"

Another opportunity for pro-active customer service can be found in what the business forms industry calls “forms management.” This is really a pretty simple technique. Whenever a forms salesperson (with a forms management system) takes an order, he or she also determines the length of time the quantity being ordered can be expected to last. At a point about half way, the salesperson calls to confirm that the usage assumption is still valid. Then, at a point perhaps a month before the quantity remaining is expected to run out, the salesperson calls again to stimulate the re-order.

How do you know how long an order will last? As is so often the case when you want to know something about a customer’s business, *ask the customer!* You don’t even have to worry about getting it exactly right on the first try. The phone call mid-way into the expected life of the order makes the technique largely “self-correcting.”

Will your customers value this sort of “printing management?” Well, how many times have people come to you in a desperate hurry because they’ve run out of letterheads, envelopes, business cards, or some other printed item? With this sort of pro-active customer service, you can take some of the worry out of your customers’ lives. And perhaps of equal importance to your sales efforts, this gives you a reason to call and stay in contact with something significant to talk about!

PIM’S and CM’S

I’ve had quite a few inquiries from quick printers wanting information on “sales software” in recent months. In fact, this was a topic of particular interest to participants on NAQP Online when I was the guest host in January. One printer who called me shortly before that program commented that “computers seem to be able to everything else, there must be a way to use them to facilitate the sales process.”

She’s right, of course. Computers can play two powerful roles in facilitating the sales process. First of all, they can serve as the storage medium for information on your customers and prospects. I’m sure that many of you are familiar with the term database, and understand that the term can encompass everything from a simple mailing list to a comprehensive listing of names, addresses, phone numbers, and other information. I know printers whose databases include information ranging from a customer’s complete purchasing history to the birthday of the buyer.

The other thing a computer can do is to help you schedule your sales activities. Since the early days of the “personal computer age,” there have been calendar products that would assist you in planning your daily, weekly, or monthly activities. There have also been database products of many varieties. In the last couple of years, products have emerged that combine both capabilities, and these are generally referred to as PIM’s, or *Personal Information Managers*. You might recognize Packrat, Ecco, Winfo Pro, Commence, and Ascend as some of the names of products in this category.

Real Business Tool

The product I use is called ACT, and it is positioned as a CM, or Contact Manager, rather than as a PIM. I think the point that ACT’s marketers are trying to get across is that it’s a real business tool in a product category where some of the entries are more suited to “social” use. I think they’re right, and so do the reviewers from most of the computer magazines, who consistently rate ACT as one of the best products in the category. Quite a few of those reviewers come right out and call ACT the best of the bunch.

I was “turned on” to ACT by John Purtell, the owner of the BCT in Dallas, TX. John was one of my early PRINTSELLING sponsors, and he also has a personal connection with the developers of ACT. He told me after a seminar several years ago that this product would be very supportive of the “system” of selling that I teach, and he gave me the name of his friend at Contact Software, the company that originally produced ACT. (Contact Software has since been purchased by Symantec, the company which produces The Norton Utilities among other leading software products. That seems to have resulted in even better service than was available before.)

I’ve placed ACT in the StartUp directory of my Windows-based system, which means that it loads automatically whenever I turn on the machine. With two keystrokes, I’m looking at the activities I’ve planned for the day. ACT allows you to list activities of three types: telephone calls to make, appointments, and things-to-do.

Typical Day

On any typical day, ACT will show me a list of the 30-40 people I want to try to connect with on the telephone. The initial listing shows me the company and individual names. A single keystroke brings me into the individual “contact screens” that carry all of the information contained in each customer/prospect record. With a contact screen in front of me, I bring myself up-to-date by reading whatever notes I placed there on my last contact, and then make the call.

When the call is completed, I make any notes that are appropriate and schedule the next contact with this customer or prospect. As with everything else in ACT, this requires only a few keystrokes (or mouse movements in the Windows or Mac versions) to set up the activity. Then the record disappears, to return automatically on the day I’ve scheduled my next contact.

If I want the record back before that, I use a “lookup” feature that will find a record by searching any field I select. The default field is *company name*, and it only takes two keystrokes to call that up. Then I type in the first few letters of the company name and it finds any records with the same sequence of letters. The more letters I type, the more selective the search becomes. For example, typing in C + O and hitting the enter key would give me a small group of contacts including Coast Publishing and three other companies in my database whose names start with the word *copy*. Typing C + O + A and hitting the enter key would call up Coast Publishing only. You can also search by the first or last name of your primary contact within a company, or the city, state, zip code, or even the company’s area code.

If I’m unable to connect with my customer or prospect, another short sequence of keystrokes will reschedule the call, along with a note reminding me that I tried on this particular day, left a message, etc.

Minor Limitation

If ACT has a limitation, it might be that it’s better suited for telephone contact than everyday outside sales activity. That is, of course, unless it’s loaded and used in a laptop. I actually use it in both of my computers, which only requires me to update the “other” computer via a communications program every time I leave home for a few days with the laptop and then return.

Even when used only with a desktop system, it’s easy enough to combine ACT usage with some basic paper-based record keeping and update the database after returning from a day of sales calls. And, of course, if you do much of your customer contact on the telephone as I do, it’s only a minor limitation anyway. I think you’ll see how a product like ACT can fit in with a strategy of regular telephone contact and pro-active customer service like we discussed earlier.