

Telephone Selling

I'm going to share my most horrifying and embarrassing personal secret with you this month. I hope you're sitting down. Prepare yourself. Here it comes. *I'm a telemarketer.*

It's true, I'm afraid. Now, in my own defense, I'm not one of those telemarketers who calls you up during the busiest part of your day to "alert you" to some great new investment opportunity, or who invades your evening at home (when you finally get home!) to try to talk to you about life insurance or sell you magazines. But it is a fact that a significant portion of my selling these days is done over the telephone.

It's not by choice, believe me. I remain convinced that the best way to sell just about *anything* is by getting yourself face-to-face with the people who want or need what you sell. In my business, though, a large part of which involves selling myself as a speaker/seminar leader, getting face-to-face with all of my prospects has simply become a geographic impossibility.

So I've had to learn to sell as effectively as possible over the telephone.

Limitations

The telephone has limitations as a selling tool. You should treat that statement as an absolute fact. Once you accept that fact, you have three choices on how to deal with its ramifications.

The first choice is to ignore the telephone's limitations. I'm sure you'll agree that's a dumb choice, but from what I see, it's a fairly common one. The second choice is to accept the telephone's limitations and work around them. The third choice is to extend your telemarketing tactics, and do a few things that will help you to overcome some of the telephone's limitations as a selling tool. That's been the best choice for me, and I think it will also be the best choice for most of you.

You won't be able to overcome those limitations unless you understand them, though, so let's spend just a few moments listing the key factors that make the telephone a less-than-perfect selling tool.

Visual Cues And Connection

The telephone doesn't allow you to see the person you're trying to sell to. This lack of "presence"—and of the opportunity for visual cues—may be the most serious limitations of telephone selling. New "picture phone" technology may ease these limitations somewhat in the future, but I think it will always be easier for a prospect or buyer to say no to a voice on the phone than to a live human being, even a voice accompanied by a "picture phone" image.

If lack of presence isn't the most serious limitation, then the difficulty of making connection in the first place probably is. You get no guarantee that the person you want will be in when you call, or that they'll take your call if they are in. Receptionists, secretaries, and/or voice mail can create a barrier that's very difficult to get through—and very frustrating to bang your head against. Even when you do get through, the attitude or environment you find are often far less than ideal.

Here's an example that should hit home. I call quite a few quick printers during the course of a typical week, not necessarily to sell, but very often to do research or reporting for one of my newsletters. A fairly large percentage of the ones I get through to seem to take my call at their front counter, and I seldom feel that I'm getting the full attention of those quick printers. Many times, the arrival of a customer, an employee with a question, or another phone call interrupts or completely ends my claim on any part of that printer's attention. Another common situation is that the printer takes my call out in the production area of the shop. It's hard to accomplish anything positive on the telephone when the person you're talking to can't hear you because of the clatter of machinery.

Telephone Strategy

An intelligent strategy for using the telephone as a selling tool has to deal with both connection and convincing issues. And I think you have to ask yourself if it's really possible to convince someone to buy from you over the telephone. Please understand, I'm not talking right now about staying in touch with existing customers. I'm talking about creating customers over the telephone.

I'm very much committed to the idea that the only thing a printer can sell over the telephone is an appointment. Sure, there will be occasional individuals who can be convinced with a telephone call that you're worthy of being trusted with their printing. But what does "occasional" mean...perhaps one or two out of every fifty or a hundred people you might call? And probably more like one out of a thousand of the kind of really substantial, value-oriented customer that you'd probably most like to gain.

I said earlier that one of your choices is to accept the limitations of the telephone and work around them. That's the strategy employed by quite a number of telemarketers of consumer goods who simply *make lots of calls*. The principle is exactly the same as with direct mail. You know that you're only going to get a limited percentage of response, so you attempt to create adequate total sales volume by contacting a large pool of prospects. It's been proven that you can get results in this way, but would you call it an *efficient* way for a quick printer to build business?

In my view, you'd be a lot better off accepting that the customer you most want is almost certainly going to require some face-to-face convincing. The good news is that accepting this reality brings your purpose in calling a prospect on the phone right into line with what the telephone *is* capable of doing for you. Use the telephone to sell the benefits of getting together with you for a face-to-face meeting. Don't try to sell *printing* until you get there.

Getting Through

Is there a secret to getting through to all of the people you want to talk to and sell to? Boy, do I wish there were! The best I've been able to come up with are some subtle ways to improve the chances of getting through.

The cornerstone of my strategy is to avoid calling "cold." The prospect who has no idea of who you are and why you're calling is the one who's least likely to take your call. The next most likely prospect to avoid you is the one who knows in general who you are, but perceives that you are "just another salesperson" looking for business.

I teach a "system" of selling in my *PRINTSELLING* seminar that uses a brief letter to pave the way for the phone call that asks for an appointment. The letter says basically this: *"I've learned that you're the person who buys printing for your company. We're a local, full-service printing company, and I think we have something to offer you. I'd like to get together to talk about that in person, so I'm going to be calling you to ask for an appointment. Please be expecting my call."*

This "extra step" in the sales process has proven to increase the likelihood that people will take your calls. And I've found a nice little added benefit in employing it myself. Because the letter says clearly that the purpose of the phone call is to ask for the appointment, I've found that the people who take my calls will agree pretty quickly to see me, or else they'll tell me why they think I'd be wasting my time on them. I haven't always let that stop me from pursuing an appointment anyway, but one way or another, it's a benefit to get the objections out on the table as early as possible.

Voice Mail

I'm pretty sure that a survey of salespeople in any and all industries would tell you that 99% of them hate voice mail. I love it. Well, maybe that's stretching it a bit, but I can at least say that I've learned to use voice mail as a positive factor. The key is to take advantage of what the technology gives you, not to deal with voice mail just like you always have with live "gatekeepers."

With live secretaries and receptionists—and especially with answering services—you're pretty much limited to leaving your name and phone number. I run into very few who will allow me to leave a message of any length or complexity. But voice mail is different. In fact, don't many people's outgoing voice mail messages encourage you to leave a detailed message and take as long as you need?

When given that opportunity, you should take advantage of it. My recommendation is that you write yourself a brief scripted message—maybe 30-45 seconds in length—that identifies a couple of key reasons why this person should call you back.

That's a key point! Remember that you're not trying to sell printing in this situation, and you're not even trying yet to sell an appointment. All you're trying to do is to get the person to call you back! At every step in the selling process, make sure that your message is in tune with your objective.

What if the person doesn't call back? I'll usually try again after 2-3 days, and if I get voice mail again, I'll leave a message that reviews what I said on the first one. If there's still no callback, I'll try again in 2-3 more days...but I won't leave another message on the person's voice mail. On the third attempt, I'll get myself to a live operator and ask if there's a particular time that I might be able to reach the person I've been calling. Many voice mail systems tell you how to get to a live operator once you're in them. I've learned that hitting the "O" key on your phone will often do that whether they tell you or not. And if that doesn't work, you can often redial and ask a live operator that question before he or she puts you into the voice mail system.

What if the person still doesn't call back after three attempts? Then I cross them off my prospect list and direct my efforts and attention to somebody else. I learned a long time ago that you can't sell to everyone. Don't waste any more time on a person who is telling you something by *not* calling back.