

THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SALES PROSPECTING

-Techniques, Tips for Keeping Your Pipeline Full -



The Practical Guide To Sales Prospecting Techniques, Tips For Keeping Your Pipeline Full

Finding new prospects is a challenge whether you're a new salesperson or a hardened veteran of the industry.

In fact, when it comes to the sales process, prospecting is the part sales reps struggle with most, according to [leaders in one study](#).

Yet in most organizations today, sales professionals' ability to bring in new business is a crucial skill. Without a [pipeline of prospects](#), there's little chance for long-term growth or even proper short-term results.

Because prospects are customers-in-the-making – whether they buy today or a year from now – sales success begins with effective prospecting.

PROSPECTING WITH PURPOSE

Prospecting creates a steady flow of new customers. The key is to identify those who fit your organization's customer profile and hold the potential for becoming buyers. When you qualify the right prospects, you can build steady growth and avoid the ups and downs of sales that frustrate some sales professionals.

“Prospects equal options,” says [Tibor Shanto, author of *Execution: Everything Else Is Just Talk!*](#) “Master prospecting and you will be the master of your sales destiny.”

Consider prospecting as the prerequisite to all the other activities that you need to do to complete a sale. Without effective prospecting, there's no way you can be fully effective at the remaining elements in the sales process.

Prospect with the Right Goals in Sight

Prospecting is about finding the right buyers and turning them into customers. And to succeed, salespeople must be relentless and efficient.

[Efficient prospecting techniques](#) enable sales professionals to accomplish three critical tasks:

- Add new prospects
- Replace lost customers, and
- Sell new products to existing customers.

“Keep your sales prospecting pipeline full by prospecting continuously,” says [Brian Tracy, author of *Eat the Frog*](#).

“Always have more people to see than you have time to see them.”

– Brian Tracy

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Brian Tracy’s advice is more than just a pithy saying.

It’s a neverending quest. The most successful salespeople continually find creative ways to uncover new prospects, find ways to help them and attract customers.

The Right Attitude Sets the Course

Sale professionals can follow every prospecting protocol and come up empty-handed if they approach this critical aspect of selling with the wrong attitude.

Prospecting, like anything else, can be viewed positively or negatively.

“How we feel when we start to prospect is going to impact our success,” says [Jeff Bloomfield, author of *Story-Based Selling*](#). “You have to possess a belief that what we are doing is actually helping people. It doesn’t matter what it is that

we're selling. What matters is that we're solving a need for a prospect. If you start thinking of prospecting as just a numbers game, you won't have much success."

Your prospecting results are [highly influenced by attitude](#). Determination, perseverance, enthusiasm and a positive attitude are the backbones of prospecting success.

"If you start thinking of prospecting as just a numbers game, you won't have much success."

- Jeff Bloomfield

Because prospecting is both art and science, the [correct mindset leads to successful prospecting](#) – and ultimately more lucrative sales.

For leaders, encouraging sales professionals to "keep their chins up" or "look on the sunny side of things" – especially after rejections – is ineffective at setting the right attitude.

Here's what actually works for sales professionals:

- **Recognize your limits.** Do you remember how many times you were cut off in traffic this morning? Or how many people let you in? Does the one thing that didn't taste right at lunch linger on your mind? Alternatively, are you thinking about what tasted great? Some people notice and focus on the bad stuff. Recognizing that you're inclined to think negatively is the first step to gaining a positive attitude.
- **Maximize your successes.** People tend to minimize their successes (in life and work) because they don't want to sound egotistical. You want to stop short of gloating about success, but don't bury it. Talk about a success once, the efforts you put into it and what you learned from it. Then keep it in your mental suitcase to review when you need to get in the right mindset.
- **Get a broad perspective.** When it comes to building and maintaining the right attitude, you are the company you keep. If you hang with Debbie Downers – who bemoan prospecting and its results – your attitude will suffer. And if you surround yourself with Suzy Sunshiners – who see no fault ever – you'll likely end up with a false sense of security. Surround yourself with people who have different perspectives on your work and goals. Sometimes you need a negative outlook to temper an overzealous attitude – or vice versa.

- **Practice gratitude.** When you're thankful for people, things and experiences, express it. Telling others that you're grateful helps you gain respect and create positive experiences, which you can call on to maintain a positive attitude.

MAKE AN ACTION PLAN YOUR PRIORITY

Most sales professionals are pumped to start the day when they have a deal to close. The idea of spending the day prospecting isn't as exciting. That's why prospecting often gets put off until a later day ... when [everything else has dried up](#).

However, if it's a priority all the time, the pipeline will never dry up. Prospect-driven sales professionals with a clear action plan give prospecting the time and discipline it requires to be done well.

An active prospecting plan includes time to identify potential customers, ways to initiate action and strategies to cultivate relationships and grow business. You plan to [stay effectively busy](#).

Make these steps part of your action plan, recognizing that the most successful salespeople include prospecting in their weekly (sometimes daily) routine.

Create a Prospecting Action Plan ...and put it in Writing



ResourcefulSelling Prospecting Action Plan

- 1. Create your ideal prospect list.** Answer these questions:
 - Who are my best customers (not necessarily the biggest, just the best)?
 - Where did I find them?
 - What industry is my best target based on my experience?
 - What is my ideal customer's company size?
 - Who is the decision maker for what I sell?
- 2. Identify how you can interact with them.** Answer these questions:
 - Who are my prospects' customers?
 - What industry and community events do they attend?
 - What social events and organizations are they most active in?
 - What blogs, newsfeeds, social media and print publications do they read and trust?
- 3. Divide your prospects into 2 lists.** Now that you can pinpoint your ideal prospects, create two lists – Need and Want. For example, the Needs may need to grow or shift or change to meet new industry specs. And the Wants may want to replace a competitor's product, upgrade technology or try a new process. Then you can tailor your approach to each. And don't worry about segmenting at this early point: It will only increase success later in the sales process.
- 4. Develop 10 questions for each type of prospect.** You want questions to create a dialogue that uncovers unfulfilled needs and how you can help. Customers can learn anything they need online. You want them to talk so you can qualify the best prospects as customers.

5. **Set specific goals and expectations.** You want to set about 10 specific meaningful and manageable goals for the week or month. Include target number of meetings, phone calls, referrals, social media activity and networking events. And remember: You're often contacting people who don't expect you. You can't expect them to buy. You can only expect to learn something that will help you start a more in-depth conversation later.
6. **Create a calendar and schedule prospecting time.** Don't leave prospecting to chance. Schedule the time you need to focus on each type of prospect and each goal. One strategy that works: Schedule prospecting time for similar situations together – for instance, all your Needs at the beginning of the week and all your Wants later in the week, or different industries each week of a month. That way, you get in the right flow and use information learned in one situation to help in another.
7. **Take action.** A solid plan includes whom you want to contact, what you want to ask and hear and how you'll do it. As you develop your pipeline, “allocate your time to ensure you can spend time both on prospects that might be smaller in size, but you can close quickly,” suggests Mark Hunter, author of *High-Profit Prospecting*, “as well as the large opportunities that will take months to close.”

The ideal calendar has sales pros spending 40% of their time developing and executing their prospecting plan and 60% of their time on activities with existing customers.

Find Your Ideal Prospects

While your approach to prospecting should be planned, recognize that prospecting can happen almost anywhere and at any time.

Start with solid research and analysis (plus your action plan and goals) to find prospects of interest. Know what prospects do and their likely objectives. You can find plenty of details for online searches, colleagues, press releases, annual reports, and social media.

From that, choose a few of the most effective avenues for approaching prospects.

- **Referrals.** Never stop asking current customers if they can refer you to another person or organization whom you can help.
- **Networking.** Join two or three local organizations (such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, and Toastmasters International) and several industry associations. Become an active participant or leader to find more prospecting opportunities.
- **Warm calls.** Referrals and people who've asked for information or help offer the opportunity to make a warm, somewhat familiar contact.
- **Cold calls.** Email and phone calls are the best inroads for cold calls to prospects who don't know you.
- **Email.** Personal messages – not mass marketing messages – will work best.
- **Events.** Industry events, such as [trade shows](#), offer a steady flow of prospects who already have an interest in your product or service.
- **Mail.** Marketing and Sales Development can help create the right materials for reaching out, but don't underestimate the power of a personal, handwritten introduction.
- **Social selling.** It's a more powerful tool than ever. More on this robust channel for prospecting follows. Remember it is [more about social media networking than direct selling](#).
- **Transitions.** Organizations and individuals in transition open great prospecting opportunities. Watch for competitors and potential prospects to make changes to staff. That's when buyers might feel neglected and are open to change.
- **Old ties.** Don't overlook lost accounts. Time heals many wounds. Lost customers are sometimes hot prospects. Approach them with caution, first understanding why the account was lost, then determining what would need to change for prospecting to be considered.

The Keys to Warm and Cold Calls

The more you know and understand about prospects' businesses and headaches, the more credible you become during warm and cold calls of all types – whether your approach is at an industry event, on the phone, via email or social media.

So, do your research and follow these keys to making effective calls:

Warm Calls

Warm calling has the advantage of comfort. Your call, intent, and interaction are at least somewhat expected and wanted.

- **Warm up the warm call.** Send something valuable before you make the warm call. A white paper, industry trend report or link to a relevant story will give you a connecting point.
- **Call or email,** introducing yourself and asking if they received what you sent. Ask: “How was it helpful?” “I found X interesting. What did you take away?” or “What more would’ve you liked to see?” Any of these questions will help open a dialogue about what’s important to them – and how you might be able to help.
- **Connect.** Ask questions that allow prospects to open up about an unfulfilled need: “I know a lot of people in your industry struggle with X. How’s that going for you?” “I saw you retweeted a story on X. How has that situation affected you?”
- **Keep your cool.** Stay calm and engaged. You don’t want to offer solutions now – or the warm call may feel very much like a hard sell, and [prospects will resent it and push back](#).
- **End it.** Try to limit warm calls to five minutes. Say, “If you have a few more minutes, I can share some information that would be helpful. If not, when can we talk again about what’s going on?”

Cold Calls

Cold calling is more of a shot in the dark – which makes it understandable that [some salespeople dread or fear it](#). By one estimate out of [a Baylor University study](#), just 2% of cold calls result in a meeting. However, [other research from The Rain Group](#) shows that [70% of customers want to hear from salespeople](#) early in their buying process. That means there's a percentage of prospects who are willing to listen to someone who can promise a better solution.

Cold calling can pay off – it's one of the only ways for salespeople to uncover new, previously unsuspecting prospects, people who are unhappy with their current situation, or at least willing to listen to a better offer. You just [can't give up easily](#): It usually takes [eight cold call attempts](#) to get through to a prospect, according to [research from Telenet and Ovations Sales Group](#).

So, approach a call or visit like this:

- **Be confident.** You need to sound confident when you identify yourself and your company. Then pause. You might be tempted to jump into a pitch, but you want to give prospects a moment to make a connection to them in some way.
- **Connect.** Now that prospects are trying to figure out how they know you, make a real connection. Mention an award the person or organization received: “Congratulations on the promotion. How’s it going so far?” Bring up an alma mater. “I see you went to X University. How did you like it?” Recognize tenure: “You’ve been at X company for more than a decade. How’d you get started there?”
- **Respond.** Prospects will likely answer your personable question before asking, “So why are you calling?” Keep the mood light with something like, “I’m glad you asked.” Or, “I almost forgot.”
- **Be honest.** Now’s the time to lay it out there. Explain in three or fewer sentences what you do and who you help. For instance, “I work with managers in X industry who do X. They typically want to improve X.” Then ask, “Does that sound like you?”

- **Open it up.** Prospects will likely say yes to that question. And now that you've managed to get them to open up about a concern, you can say, "Tell me more about that."

INCREASE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKING

[Social selling or social media networking](#) will get you noticed. More prospecting can and needs to be done via the most popular business social media channels: LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook.

Here are some steps and tactics to follow.

- **Follow and listen.** Start following prospective companies and any members of their C-suite who are active in social media on their LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook pages. You don't want to send requests for meetings immediately. Keep an eye on what they post to understand the subjects that interest them as an organization and individuals, plus any concerns they voice. You'll see clues in what they retweet, like and share.
- **Make personal connections.** For LinkedIn in particular, send invitations to connect with company decision-makers. If they accept the invitation, introduce yourself and your company more formally and in depth.
- **Join in.** Comment on their original posts. Join conversations that generate a lot of buzz: They're clearly a hot button. Share their content and like what they're sharing. Send congratulations when they announce good news.
- **Ask for a meeting.** Once you've connected and engaged in social media, you're more equipped to ask for a meeting. Find out if they're going to an industry event or local event by watching for posts with that event's hashtag. Then start a conversation with that hashtag and ask to meet up. If they share your content, thank them and ask if it's OK to make a brief call to talk a bit more about the subject.

Tips to Improve Voicemail Response

Face it: Most prospects will see an unknown number pop up on their phones and won't answer your unsolicited calls. So, you're destined to get lots of voicemail and very little human interaction.

To increase the chances that they'll return your message:

- **Be brief.** Keep the message (that you've prepared) to less than 30 seconds. The optimal is between eight and 14 seconds, [according to a Gryphon study](#). So you really need to keep it tight.
- **Speak clearly.** Even in your brevity, you want to speak slower than your usual pace, so you're sure they get everything you say.
- **Leave your name, company, and number at the beginning and end of the message,** so they don't have to make an effort to re-listen to get that vital information.
- **Explain your reason for the call and a call to action.** In between your contact details, tell prospects what you do and how it fits into a need they have now. Ask them to return your call so they can gain a clear benefit.

Techniques for Setting Appointments

To increase the odds of getting appointments from your prospecting efforts:

- **Reach out during odd hours.** Most people don't punch a 9-to-5 clock these days. They work long hours and are attached to their work phone at all hours. They take and make calls and read and respond to email early and late. So, call before business hours (that will help get past gatekeepers who more likely work regular hours). Send your email at very early hours (such as 5 a.m.), so they're at the top of the screen when prospects open the program at 6 a.m.

- **Mix your media.** When you believe you have the right prospects, request appointments in a variety of ways. Leave voicemail. Send email. Connect through social media. Send a handwritten note. (Just don't do it all in one day. Or one week.)
- **Follow Marketing.** You'll set more appointments with people who've interacted with your company than from cold calls. Use regular updates from Marketing on who has downloaded from your company website, who visited the website (when they can catch this information), and who attended events your company held or also attended.
- **Be specific.** When you ask for a meeting, avoid vague requests. Don't say, "When can we meet?" Say, "I have Thursday afternoon and Friday morning available. What time can we get together?"

Recognize And Overcome Prospecting Reluctance

Prospecting can be the toughest part of the sales process for many sales professionals. The biggest reason: Nearly everyone has a natural disdain for rejection, and prospecting is full of that.

"But the enduring mantra of the fanatical prospector is 'One more call,'" says [Jeb Blount, author of *Fanatical Prospecting*](#).

To become closer to being a fanatical prospector, recognize the common signs of call reluctance:

- **Giving up after the first few attempts.** If it doesn't come easily, you might blame Marketing or Sales Development for passing along low-quality leads.
- **Taking it personally.** When prospects refuse to hear you out, much less meet with you, you chalk it up to, "They don't like me," and call it a day
- **Spending more time with existing customers.** Yes, existing clients need your attention, but as noted before, only about 60% of a sales professional's time should be spent catering to them.

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of the fanatical
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– Jeb Blount

Because many salespeople wouldn't pick prospecting as their ideal day at the office, they might try to minimize the time they spend on it. However, doing so puts your sales growth and career at risk: If you aren't calling on prospects, someone else is.

“If you're not moving closer to what you want in sales, you probably aren't doing enough prospecting,” says [Jack Canfield, sales expert and author of *The Success Principles*](#).

To overcome prospecting reluctance, and move closer to a sale:

- **Keep looking.** Never stop looking for potential new customers. If you dislike the list Marketing creates, commit to relying more on referrals and event networking.
- **Know the real business issues facing prospects.** The more you learn about prospects' issues and specific needs before you even make a call, the more likely you can address those immediately and increase your likelihood of a successful prospecting call (which builds confidence to make more).
- **Target well.** Build and reevaluate the profile of your ideal customers, segments, and markets. The better-aligned prospects are with that, the better every prospecting call will be. Then you waste little time trying to sell to people who aren't a good fit.
- **Know what you're up against.** Stay on top of industry changes, adjustments in your market and what the competition does. Then you can leverage movements that leave customers feeling neglected to find and convert prospects.
- **Own your knowledge.** Prospects buy what you know more than they buy a product or service. Your deep knowledge that can help customers will attract and retain them.
- **Know your decision-maker.** Even if you find an ideal prospect, you can waste time (and lose heart) by dealing with the wrong person. You don't need to insult contacts or step on anyone's toes, but you want to identify decision-makers quickly to maintain prospecting momentum.

Get Past the Gatekeepers

One of greater barriers salespeople face in prospecting is [getting past the gatekeeper](#) – the one who holds the key for you to get in the decision-maker’s door. It might be PR, an administrative assistant or the company’s receptionist.

While gatekeepers are just trying to do their job, you need to do yours: Prospecting. Sometimes, to storm the castle, the most useful weapon you have is a friend at the gate. Here are some ways to get through a tough screener.

- **Give gatekeepers the same respect** you’d give the CEO (if you could just get a meeting with her!)
- **Ask for help.** [Gain trust by asking gatekeepers](#) for ideas on how to do your job in a way that’s most efficient for the decision-maker.
- **Explain your position.** Tell gatekeepers about the research you’ve done and why they’re a good prospect. Then ask gatekeepers why they’d agree or disagree. Gatekeepers often influence decision-makers’ decisions, so their insight is useful.

What to Do When

You’re Finally in Front of a Prospect

When you finally [get time with prospects](#), you want to use that time well. You only have about 10 seconds to make a strong first impression. Accomplish that, and you still don’t have much more than 30 minutes to captivate them. To be successful once you’re in front of prospects:

- **Have several opening statements ready.** Be prepared with openings for a tough gatekeeper, a busy executive, bad timing, and even an open-minded, interested prospect. [Read your audience](#) and get to work.
- **Put the benefits up front.** No matter your audience, [you want to tell them how they’ll benefit from your relationship](#) (perhaps increased efficiency, competitiveness or appeal).

- **Ask an open-ended question that gauges interest:** “Does that sound like something that fits your current situation?” “How do you see X fitting into your operations?” Their response and/or objection will dictate where you go next.
- **Include powerful, simple, visual language and avoid jargon.** For instance, say, “*maximize*” and “*boost*,” not “increase.” Say, “*cut*” and “*eliminate*,” not “reduce.”
- **Go in with a winning attitude.** Project confidence, not cockiness, by approaching decision-makers as peers, not buyers. Offer information relevant to their personal needs.

Start A Relationship By Asking Power Questions

When you’re with prospects, you want to get them to talk and become emotionally involved. [Ask the right questions](#) for the situation, and you can make a successful prospecting call.

Questions that identify pain.

The avoidance of a pain point often motivates people to buy more than the pursuit of a gain. To help prospects identify their pain, ask:

- What concerns you most about deciding to buy?
- What do you want to avoid moving forward?
- What would keep you from moving forward on changes?
- What do you dislike doing now that we can do for you in the future?

Questions that identify opportunity.

These prospecting questions help identify weaknesses in the current situation. Ask:

- What’s the quality of what you use now?
- What do you like about what you use now?

- Will what you use now get you where you want to be in the future?
- What kind of feedback do the people using that product give you now?

Questions that impress.

You can use these questions to help prospects see the value:

- How much flexibility do you need from a supplier?
- What can we do to make your purchasing experience easier?
- How important is it to you that your vendor offer (your specific, differentiating) service?
- Can you tell me about special order needs you have?
- If you could have one extra feature, what would it be?

Know How Prospects Make Buying Decisions

Before you have the opportunity to meet with prospects, you want to [understand their decision-making process](#). Researchers found that they go through four distinct phases, and if you can stay on that track with them, you'll more likely turn prospects into customers.

1. **They recognize needs.** If prospects don't see a need, they can't justify the cost or hassle of changing. Salespeople want to focus on helping prospects recognize a problem and need. Questions like those in our "Power Questions" section below will help.
2. **They get anxious.** Once prospects recognize the problem, they get concerned about it – and might postpone making decisions and/or worry about unfounded issues. That's when sales professionals want to avoid two things at this point: downplaying their concerns and applying pressure to buy. Instead, focus on the value of the solution.

3. **They evaluate.** Now that prospects see a need and are concerned, they want to look at options – which could be the competition. This is when sales professionals want to reevaluate the prospects' criteria and show they have a solution that fits it.
4. **They decide.** That doesn't mean the sale is over. Prospects who are customers still judge like prospects. Customers continue to evaluate quality, service, and value, so sales professionals need to monitor prospects' happiness even after the sale.

How to Minimize Rejection

[Rejection is a hard reality](#) of prospecting. There's no avoiding it. There's only minimizing it.

To keep it at a minimum:

- **Qualify every prospect.** You foster rejection if you don't align prospects' potential needs and wants with the benefits and values of what you have to offer.
- **Prepare.** Don't wing calls. Ever. Show prospects you are interested in them by understanding their business, needs, and challenges.
- **Check your timing.** Check the pulse of the organization before you start prospecting. Is there a known crisis? Is it their busiest time of the year? Don't press forward if you are at a disadvantage going in.
- **Know the issues.** Don't offer a solution until you've asked enough questions to truly understand the issues. If you propose solutions to problems that don't exist, you're destined for a quick rejection.

Best Ways to Follow Up When Prospecting

Whether your prospecting efforts result in what feels like wasted time, another meeting or achieve a sale, [follow-up is critical to furthering relationships](#) with prospects.

Here are follow-up tips to foster open relationships.

- **Ask for the best times and ways** to stay in touch with prospects.
- **Double-check and note any follow-up information** you need to provide. Then deliver it in a timeframe the prospect expects.
- **Continue to share information** that will contribute to prospects' success – perhaps connect them to others who faced and overcame an issue you uncover or pass along industry changes they need to know.
- **Continue your social media networking efforts.** Like and share their posts. Join in conversations they initiate. Congratulate them for good news posted on social media.
- **Make the “insiders.”** Make prospects continue to feel like they have an inside track with you. Invite them to enjoy sneak peeks at new products and services or be part of trials.

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