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Beyond Smiling and Dialing **Getting the best results from inside sales**

In the dictionary, “selling” is defined as “to cause to be accepted, to advocate successfully.” Selling is reaching out to another human being to convince them to buy your products. Throughout most of history this was accomplished in a face to face meeting. Selling changed when Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, making it possible to make sales across the miles. In the 150 years since Bell’s first phone call, many new ways to “reach out and sell someone” have been added to the inside salesperson’s arsenal.

Pros and Cons of Inside Sales & Outside Sales

I started my advertising sales career as a telephone sales representative. In the intervening three decades, I have worked as an outside sales representative, an inside sales manager and as an outside sales manager. Today I work with my company’s inside and outside sales teams. This experience puts me in a unique position to understand the pros and cons of both modes of selling advertising. The primary advantage outside sales people have over their office bound colleagues is visual presence. Outside sales people can make eye contact with the customer; they can show the product and make immediate use of visual aids to close a sale. They can also learn a lot about the prospect and his/her business by simply looking around. The downside of outside sales is that field sales are expensive and time consuming. Visiting accounts at their locations burns up gallons of gasoline and valuable selling time. A prospect who forgets a meeting, or isn’t prepared for it can “blow” an entire morning. A fundamental truth about selling is that we only get paid for one activity—talking to customers about advertising. Everything else we do, paperwork, meetings, completing reports etc., merely supports this core activity. The key advantage of inside sales is the sheer number of conversations a sales person can have in a day. An inside salesperson can make several calls while a field sales person is driving from one call to the next. If a customer is not available, they can be on to their next client within a few moments. This capability makes inside sales people highly efficient and keeps sales costs low. The downside of inside sales is that reaching decision makers is much more difficult. Very few people will turn their back and refuse to talk to a sales rep calling on their business. These same people have no problem with deleting an inside salesperson’s e-mail or voice mail

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message. It is also more difficult for an inside salesperson to present their case without being able to physically present their products.

The modern inside sales representative

In the past, many companies considered inside sales people as mere “order-takers.” Most sales were initiated by a customer calling in and most orders were for small classified programs. Callers who wanted to purchase larger programs were referred to “a sales person.” Some publishers established “tele-marketing” departments to make outgoing calls. These calls were generally limited to calling on private party ads in competitive publications. In recent years, more and more papers have realized the value of well trained inside sales people who actively canvass and sell aggressive advertising campaigns. Unfortunately, some companies still look on inside sales as an entry level or second class sales position.

When I am hiring an inside sales person, I look for several key qualities. First and foremost, I look for excellent verbal and written communication skills. A good inside rep must, by definition, be a good listener and be able to explain things clearly and concisely. I usually conduct a telephone interview with the candidate to gauge their telephone skills. Before concluding the call, I ask them to send me several items such as a letter and a writing sample. I give them detailed instructions on how to submit the items to me. This gives me a chance to evaluate their ability to hear and follow instructions. Their e-mail, letter and writing sample permit me to judge their written communication skills, a vital factor when so much business is conducted via e-mail. I look for accuracy, clarity and readability. During a follow-up interview, I ask questions about their organizational abilities. I find that telephone experience is a minor factor in my decision. Many tele-marketing positions or customer service positions require little thought or sales ability. Outside or even retail sales experience is generally a better predictor of a candidate’s sales abilities. Once on board, I thoroughly train the new person on our products, pricing and procedures. Their training includes a lot of on the phone role play to get them comfortable about presenting our products and answering objections. I invest a lot of time in teaching the reps to engage prospects with attention grabbing, value oriented call openings. While I do not like to restrict reps to using a “sales script,” I will have the new person write out a script for themselves. This forces them to think about how they want to describe the product in their own words.

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Equipping your inside sales team

One of the great advantages of selling from the comfort of your desk is that inside sales people can keep everything they need right at their fingertips. Work with your people to develop data sheets on all of your products. You can do this in a digital or a printed version, but these should include all the pertinent details of a product, i.e. circulation etc., and key benefits. These should be printed large and bullet pointed, so the rep can quickly access the information when they have a customer on the phone. They should also have maps to help them describe your coverage to clients. Having the ability to answer a customer's questions quickly and accurately will help the inside rep establish trust with their clients.

Many inside reps today spend as much of their time sending e-mails as they do on the phone. To make the best use of this tool, I work with our top inside sales people to develop e-mail templates. These are carefully crafted messages designed to clearly communicate the value of our products. This not only saves time for the reps, but also ensures that the message is effective. We have created a number of these addressing a variety of products and sales situations. For "snail mail," we have a file of draft letters on file. Our goal is to make sure that everything issued by our inside sales department is well thought out and professional.

One of the challenges inside people have is the ability to do "show and tell" with their products. It is possible to leverage technology to mitigate this problem. One creative solution is to download a presentation to YouTube. This puts a face on the rep and allows them to demonstrate the advantages of the product. This is simple and the rep can simply send the client a link. We've learned that sound is the key to producing a quality video, so consider using an external microphone. For a more interactive presentation, conference sites like GoToMeeting can be used. It is quite simple to do a quick PowerPoint presentation and set up a conference call with the customer. This allows the rep to show the presentation on the customer's computer while they describe the information. This is also an excellent way to walk a customer through your online products. Depending on a customer's technical expertise, you might want to consider using video-conferencing or Skype, but the more complicated you make things, the more Murphy will enforce his law. Before using any technology, it is wise to test it to be sure you are 100% familiar with the software.

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Don't neglect the U.S. Mail as a selling tool. If your reps agree, consider getting them stationary featuring their photo. A hand written thank you note on this personalized letterhead makes that "voice on the phone" into a real person and helps cement the relationship. If necessary, inside reps should be able to visit their client's locations or invite them into your offices. Often a face to face meeting can help the rep secure a new account, which can then be serviced from the office. The goal is to make sales and to service accounts in the most efficient manner.

Getting the most from your inside sales staff

All salespeople, inside or outside, must be properly led and motivated if they are to perform their best. An inside rep's compensation plan should be tied to their performance. They should be held accountable for both activity (i.e. number of customer contacts) and sales goals. As we have seen, the secret to success in inside sales is maintaining a high volume of customer contacts. Making large numbers of calls can be a grind and inside sales people have to contend with a great deal of rejection. In order to keep your inside sales people productive, management must make a conscious effort to keep their staff motivated and engaged.

Many papers have included an aggressive inside sales effort into their business plan for decades. A carefully selected and well trained inside sales team can help your organization connect with today's "on the go" clients. Their low cost of sales means that inside sales people contribute disproportionately to your company's profitability. While there will always be a need for outside sales people, in today's digital world, success in selling advertising is an inside job!

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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