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Raising the dead (Accounts)

The “flat-line” scene is a staple of the television medical drama. The patient is on the table, when suddenly the heart rate monitor emits a loud beep and the camera cuts to a flat white line on a small green screen. Someone shouts code blue and everyone begins rushing around and screaming instructions. The day is saved when the attractive young doctor yells “CLEAR”, slams the paddles down on the patient’s chest and restores the victim back to life. While selling advertising isn’t literally a life and death matter, the life of our papers often depends upon keeping our relationships with our customers alive. When a customer informs you that he/she will no longer be advertising with you, you need to go into “Code Blue” mode to keep them in your paper. Here are some ideas on keeping your customer relationships and your publication healthy.

“An ounce of prevention...”

Many of those people who end up on the gurney are there because they failed to adopt healthy habits or because they ignored the early warning signs of disease. Eating right and getting regular check-ups is much less painful than having two high voltage electrodes applied to your bare chest. Likewise, it is much easier to hold on to a current advertiser than it is to reactivate a lost one. The way to keep an account relationship healthy is to feed it a steady diet of ideas and to exercise gratitude. Customers leave because they see little or no value in the relationship. If we only take their money and run ineffective ads in the paper, your relationship will grow weaker and weaker. Taking a proactive approach by frequently offering the account fresh ideas demonstrates your interest in the customer and your desire to help them. Listening to the customer and learning about their needs shows that you value their input and ideas. Customers want to know that you appreciate their business. Shooting off a quick “Thanks” as you run out the door with their check is insufficient in a competitive market place. Taking the time to drop the customer a personalized thank you note or bringing them the occasional donut or muffin tells them that you value them as individuals. Customers who are pleased with your level of service are much less susceptible to a competitor’s sales pitch.

“I just want to listen to your heart...”

I visit my doctor every six months. This keeps me healthy and helps him make his boat payments. Frequent customer satisfaction “check-ups” will protect you from unpleasant surprises. You need to know how they feel and think about you and your

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product. Frequently asking for feedback allows you to “diagnose” a problem before it festers into a cancellation. Probing for their feelings allows you to redesign their ads or modify their program before you find yourself fighting to hold on to their business.

“Code blue! Code blue! Do something STAT!”

We’ve all had the conversation, phone call, e-mail, fax or letter. *“Nothing personal... I’ve enjoyed working with you...but I’ve decided to go another direction with my advertising.”* These few simple words feel remarkably similar to a punch in the stomach. You need to do something...but what? The first thing you should do is take a deep breath and count to ten. We’ve all been told that in sales, you can’t take things too personal, but this isn’t realistic. Successful salespeople are very involved in their accounts and are passionate about what they do. A sales person who doesn’t take things personally usually doesn’t sell very much. Losing an account is an emotionally charged situation for both the customer and the sales person. The account knows that their decision will hurt the rep, who they may genuinely like, they may be conflicted about the decision and most of all they dread the sales rep’s reaction. Most people hate to deliver bad news and try to avoid unpleasant confrontations. Losing an account means much more to a rep than the loss of income. They may feel betrayed by someone they tried to help, someone they considered a friend, they may feel like they failed and they may be embarrassed to report the loss to their coworkers. To a sales person, the loss of an account equates to a loss of self-esteem. Emotionally intelligent sales people acknowledge their feelings and then act in a rational manner. Responding emotionally, rather than reacting thoughtfully, will only make matters worse.

If you challenge the customer’s decision directly, you will force them to dig in their heels and vehemently defend their position. They have a right to cancel their advertising. If you challenge their decision, they may see it as a personal attack. If you hope to recover the business, you must maintain your relationship with the customer and keep the channels of communication open. The first step in this process is to acknowledge their right to cancel and show your respect for them as an individual, *“Mr. Customer, I’m sorry to hear that, I’ve enjoyed working with you but you certainly have the right to choose where you invest your money.”* This statement will defuse the situation. The customer may have anticipated an argument and will be relieved, and grateful, that you did not react emotionally. Next try to discover what is behind their decision. *“Mr. Customer, as I’ve said I’ve liked working with you, you’ve been a great customer and I hope I haven’t let you down. Can you tell me what led to your decision? It will help me serve my customers better in the future.”* In addition to gathering

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information, this phrasing leverages your relationship and makes the customer feel obligated to give you an answer. It is unlikely that you will get their real motivation from your first round of questions. Just as on a new business call, you will have to ask follow up questions to get to the root cause of their decision.

If the customer tells you that, *“they didn’t feel that the advertising was working”* or *“I’ve read that print is dead”* or anything that indicates that they doubt the value of your product, ask them, *“Mr. Customer, I understand how you feel; you want to make sure you’re getting a return on your investment. If I can prove that our paper will produce the results you need, would you reconsider your decision?”* You are not asking them to continue advertising, but just to “reconsider.” This makes agreeing to your request much more palatable.

If the customer tells you that they are cancelling because they are going with a competitor, resist the urge to bash the other media. If you tell them advertising in “XYZ” is stupid, you imply that they are “stupid” for deciding to go that route. It is far better to respond with something like this. *“Mr. Customer, I’m glad that you are still going to be advertising, we both know how important that is in your business. Some of my accounts also run in XYZ and I’ve heard some good things about them. May I ask what led you to choose XYZ.”* This approach accomplishes several things. It sets the customer at ease, and raises the possibility of continuing to run with you as well as with the competitor. Asking this question will also give you insight into the customer’s motivations. Questions are your most valuable tool in getting the customer to think about their decision. *“Mr. Customer, I know XYZ has great coverage north of town, what are you going to do to reach the folks in the south end outside of their coverage?”* Your goal is to avoid directly challenging the competitor or the customer’s decision, while leading the customer to question their decision.

“A third alternative”

The customer may see the decision to cancel as binary, they either advertise or they don’t, they advertise in your paper or on the radio station. You need to show them a third alternative. They can continue to advertise while reducing their costs, allowing you to retain some of their business and keep the relationship alive. They can advertise on the radio and use a coupon in your paper to encourage radio listeners to take action. This is one place where people’s reluctance to change actually helps you. They may not want to risk making a big change. Showing them a third alternative allows them to change directions without giving up their current program entirely.

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“They may not be dead; they may just be in a coma.”

If a customer has decided to stop advertising, you may not be able to change their mind. They may have committed their budget to another media. This doesn't mean you should give up. If you fail to get the customer to reconsider their decision in the short term, keep in touch with them. Don't simply stop by and say, *“if you're ready to advertise again, give me a call.”* Give them information they can use, patronize their business. I like to look at their ads in a competitive media and get my artist to improve them. I stop by and say, *“Mr. Customer, I remember you told me that X was important to your business. Your ad in XYZ didn't promote this product. As a favor to me, I asked my artist to do up an ad you can give to your rep promoting this service.”* The customer will begin wondering why they ever changed and if the competitor slips up or raises their prices, you'll be the customer's first call. Remember selling advertising is a marathon, not a sprint.

“The paycheck you save may be your own”

Most sales training is focused on acquiring new customers. In many businesses this works fine. If you're selling aluminum siding, you don't get a lot of repeat business. In our business, we make our money by selling customers and getting them to advertise frequently over long periods of time. Community papers, as the name implies, draw their customers from a limited geographic area, a lost customer leaves a hole that we can't always fill by going out and getting another account. ER doctors know every life is precious, in our profession every advertiser is precious. Doctors save lives by staying calm and using their expertise and training to help their patients. If we stay calm and apply our advertising and sales skills well, we can bring those “dead” accounts back to life.

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

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