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Defending your accounts from the competition

Some times at work I feel like Luke Skywalker. I am leading my band of free paper rebels against the evil empires of large daily papers, cable television, billboard companies and direct mail houses. Our great nemesis is the internet/social media death star. The only thing we can rely on is the “FORCE!” In our industry the “FORCE” consists of out working, out thinking and providing better service than any of the competitive storm-troopers who are trying to steal our advertisers. Here are some Jedi sales techniques you can use to keep your customers from going over to the dark side.

There are no secure accounts

I recently saw a tee shirt that read, “You’d be paranoid too, if everyone was out to get you!” In the current business environment every other media outlet is out to get our customers, so it pays to be paranoid. The twin factors of a rapidly changing media market and a struggling economy has made the already competitive world of advertising sales absolutely vicious. Just like us, our competitors have had to become very aggressive to maintain their profitability. They see us as an easy target because of all the news about the death of print. We know better, but our clients may not. Our competitors use the fallacy of print’s decline as a lever to pry our customers away from us. It is very, very dangerous to be complacent about the loyalty of any customer, regardless of how long they have been advertising or how good your personal relationship is with them.

A penny for your thoughts about me

One of the keys to holding onto your customers is managing your customer’s perception of you and your company. When the customer hears your name or sees your product what is the first thing that comes to mind? The worst case scenario is the customer cringes when they think of you. Reps that forget to place an order or fail to proofread every ad roll out the red carpet for their competitors. In better times, customers may be willing to overlook errors but today’s customers have little patience for carelessness.

Customers are working with short staffs and taking on additional responsibilities to stay competitive, so they are busier than ever. Nothing aggravates a customer more than a sales rep who doesn’t respect their time. Reps who are chronically late,

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who are unprepared for a meeting or make calls during the busy part of the week are a waste of the customer's time. This not only aggravates the customer but leads to poor calls. Because the call is rushed, the sales person may not have the time to conduct a proper needs analysis.

Surveys of advertisers have found that customers look to their sales rep for creative ideas and layouts. The most dangerous thing a sales rep can say is "Any changes this week?" This puts the stress and responsibility of ad design on the customer. This is not their primary area of expertise and they already have a long job description. It is the rep's responsibility to give the customer fresh ideas and advertising recommendations. Customers may say no, or they may completely change your proposal, but they will greatly appreciate your efforts. You want to be the sale person the advertiser remembers as "the one who is constantly trying to help me" rather than the "one who makes me do all the work."

Friends don't let friends run bad ads

There is an old saying that goes "Nothing succeeds like success!" This is especially true in advertising. Well designed creative ad layouts with eye catching headlines and compelling offers make the advertiser's cash registers ring. When their ads are working and they are making money, customers are unlikely to cancel your program. It is easy to forget how important this is, we get paid just as much for a bad quarter page as we do for a great quarter page. Investing the time and effort to create ads reaps rewards in customer loyalty. Often, the biggest impediment to running great ads is the customer themselves. They want to cram everything about their business in a two inch ad or they are reluctant to make their offers compelling to the reader. Sometimes customers don't want to spend enough to get measurable results. As sales professionals our job is to persuade people to do what is best for them. We need to provide them with research and testimonials to convince them of the value of good advertising. Sometimes, we have to argue with them to get them to do what they need to do to make both the advertiser and the rep successful. Always remember that many more customers are lost because they spent too little, than because they spent too much on advertising. Prominent, dominant programs get noticed and bring people through the customer's door. Good programs are not an expense they are a profit center.

Have I told you lately why you love me?

We are *sales*people, by definition we *sell*. In our world, every call is a *sales* call.

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Every interaction with a customer is a chance to tell them why they should advertise with us, or just as important, why they are advertising with us. Selling is not an event, it is an ongoing process. I have seen reps jump through hoops to win a new account and then go into “service” mode. When they were trying to close the sale they told the customer all about their circulation, readership and the results that advertisers were getting from their papers. Once the sale is made, their conversations revolve around schedules, invoices and the details of their program. This is a mistake! People forget why they decided to advertise with you. Every conversation and every e-mail is an opportunity to reinforce the customer’s initial decision to advertise with you.

If, on every call, you remind the customer, *“Thanks, remember this ad will reach over 10,000 people in Ourtown and in Nexttown,”* this fact will be burned into their brain.

When the competition comes in and tries to take the account away, they will think, *“I’m reaching 10,000 potential customers I’d risk that by changing media.”* Your competitors spend a lot of time telling the customer why your paper “stinks”, you are the only person who is likely to tell them why advertising with you is a good idea.

It is much easier to keep a customer sold, than to resell them after they’ve been lured away by a competitor. Make a point of including at least one “value statement” in every interaction with your advertisers.

You never get stuck in traffic when you go the extra mile

I work with a rep who loves to bake. Every few weeks she takes homemade chocolate chip cookies to her clients. One of her accounts told me, *“I don’t know if my ad works but I do know the cookies are yummy.”* This rep is setting herself apart from the many advertising sales reps she competes with. I am not much of a baker, but I always sent my customers a motivational quote every week. Anything you can do to strengthen your relationship with the advertiser and make yourself memorable serves to keep your competition at bay. Whenever possible patronize your customer’s businesses and try to remember their birthdays, business anniversaries etc. Use hand written thank you notes to express your appreciation of their business. You can kill the proverbial two birds with one stone by helping your customers network. For example, if one of your retailers tells you that she intends to remodel her storefront, it pays to introduce her to one of your contractor advertisers. This is a win-win-double win situation; the retailer finds someone to do the work, the contractor gets a job and you get brownie points with two advertisers. Research shows that sales people who surprise their clients with unexpected positive experiences increase their sales.

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When the lions are hungry, it doesn't pay to be the slowest gazelle

I am thankful for every advertiser my company has. I know every week my competitors are trying to take them away from me. I know that just being grateful for their support, or even telling them thank you, is not enough. I need to prove my gratitude through my actions. As a child my grandmother was always saying "good enough is never good or enough!" This is good advice in today's dog eat dog media market. Good enough just doesn't cut it anymore. There are a lot of competitors willing to take our accounts away, if we want to stop them, our ordinary customer service has to be EXTRA-ordinary customer service.

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

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