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You can run but you can't hide; reaching decision makers.

Selling advertising is hard when you are in front of a customer or have them on the telephone. Selling advertising is impossible when you can't talk to the customer. Decision makers have become harder and harder to reach. As pressures mount they become less and less willing to spend time with sales people and advances in technology have made hiding from the people they wish to avoid much easier. As sales people we need to leap over these hurdles to present our products and close sales.

Past Link & Learn articles have dealt with leaving effective telephone and e-mail messages. You can access these by going to the Paper Chain website and clicking on the Link & Learn tab. In this piece we will look at working with the people who stand between you and the decision maker.

Gatekeepers

Most sales people view "Gatekeepers" as their mortal enemies. They view the receptionist or secretary much like Dorothy and Toto saw the wicked witch of the west—a force of pure evil whose only reason for existing is to prevent them from reaching the wizard in the Emerald City. Actually the gatekeepers we encounter are generally nice people. Receptionists are often hired specifically because of their excellent people skills. They stand in our way because that is their job. They have been instructed to keep sales people away from their boss. The reception desk or the switchboard is the company's first line of defense against the hordes of salespeople that call on them everyday. After owning a business for a number of years, I came to realize that most sales people are terrible at their jobs. They pay little attention to customers and their needs and are totally focused on "their pitch." These people offer little or no value to a prospect and even worse can become a huge waste of a decision maker's time. These "so called" sales people make it tough for the rest of us. The gatekeeper has no way of knowing that you offer great solutions to their company's problems.

The best strategy when dealing with gatekeepers is to get them on your side. These people, though often poorly paid and underappreciated, often have a lot of power in an organization. They control access to the key players. The first step in winning them over is to change your attitude toward them. Most people either ignore receptionists or treat them with condescension. If you look down on them or see them as an enemy they will sense this no matter what you say. Treat them as you would a valuable prospect because that is just what they are. The first sale you must make to their company is to sell yourself to the receptionist. Learn their name and use it on each call and take a few moments to talk with them. After you have built a relationship with them, solicit their advice on how you should

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proceed. Asking for their opinion not only shows your respect for them but also allows you to tap into their special insight into the internal workings of the prospect's business. From their central vantage point, receptionists often know more about how a company functions in the real world than the senior executives do. If you make a good personal connection they will often become your "co-conspirator" and will actually get you in to see their boss or will at least forward your material along.

Local Managers

Branch managers also present a challenge. The good news is that they are easy to reach; the bad news is that they have virtually no power to make decisions. The local manager's function is to convey the wishes of upper management to the front line employees and to implement the company's policies. They often work long hours and have many routine duties to perform. Middle managers get little of the glory when their store does well and all of the blame when it performs poorly. Very few frontline managers are risk takers and often they are driven by a desire to not "make waves." Before they will help you set a meeting with their boss, you have to convince them that it is in their best interest to do so. You need to focus on how your product can benefit them specifically. Talk about how the program can increase sales at their location. You must make sure the manager is 100% sold on the program before they will consider passing it along. They need to believe that there is no career risk involved if they get behind your program. You want them to think that this is a surefire way to make them stand out and advance within their company. Like gatekeepers, treat frontline managers with respect and pick their brains for "insider" information. Their support will help you close a sale when you get to the decision maker.

Selling from the top down

Often the best way to get through gatekeepers and frontline managers is to simply go around them. If the local people will not share the names of the decision maker, you need to do some research. If your target company has a website, go online and look for the names of the principle players. Their site also will help you understand what is important to the company's management. Another source of information is www.manta.com; this website offers a free database of businesses throughout the U.S. Their reports often include the names and locations of important people in your target accounts. If the company you are pursuing has a sales force, give them a call. Sales people naturally like to talk and are often much more forthcoming with critical information than the other departments.

Once you have the decision maker's name try to reach them directly by using the company's phone or e-mail directory. I often will call early in the morning or after 5 because executives typically work longer days than their staff. It is vital

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to be well prepared for the initial contact when contacting key players. Remember decision makers are busy people. You must be able to quickly position the benefits you offer and to explain how you can solve their problems. Use the information you have collected from your research and from your conversations with lower level people to demonstrate at least a basic understanding of their business needs. There is a danger of taking an “end run” around the frontline people. You may alienate the local contacts but often this is a risk worth taking. When you are getting no business from the prospect, you have absolutely nothing to lose.

Effective networking

Business writer Harvey MacKay famously said, “The most important word in the English language is rolodex!” Many successful businesses have been built on the power of networking. As an advertising sales person you should consider joining local community groups. Being active in organizations like the Chamber of Commerce or the Lion’s Club is a great way to make important business contacts. Volunteering on community projects will give you an opportunity to work side by side with potential customers. When you meet people in this context they get to know you as an individual. This establishes valuable relationships, which can open doors for future sales presentations. Some of these contacts may become advertisers; others will be able to refer you to prospects. The key here is to be fully engaged with the organizations by serving on committees and volunteering.

Social networking sites, particularly the business oriented sites like LinkedIn, also provide a way to connect with the people you need to meet. Update your status regularly and promote your success. Offline, don’t forget to ask for referrals from your current advertisers. This is a doubly powerful tool because when you are referred by a current customer you get a de facto testimonial in addition to an introduction.

Conclusion

One of my old sales managers was fond of saying; “there’s never much traffic when you go the extra mile.” This is very true when you are trying to break into accounts, which make you jump through hoops to get to the decision maker. If you are creative enough, persistent enough and are willing to do the work to break through all the barriers in your way, you are unlikely to run into much competition. This is why the hardest accounts to sell often become your most loyal customers.

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

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