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Every Call Is A Sales Call

By Jim Busch

When one of my company's sales people gets into trouble with an account, I frequently get the "911" call. As the company's sales training and research manager our reps look to me to "help them put out fires." I recently got one of these calls from a rep in one of our satellite offices. He was calling me about his largest account, a small pizza chain with 4 shops clustered in the suburbs north of the city. This account had been a major advertiser for over twenty years with a 52-week contract for front cover ads. They paid their invoices well within terms and were easy to deal with, making few demands on the rep. In short, they were the perfect advertiser and this is why the rep was shocked when they informed him that they would not be renewing their contract and that they had decided to "go another route with their advertising."

I started by talking to the rep about his experiences with the account. He told me that the owners of the pizza shop had never told him that they weren't happy with him or our product. He said he visited the account every week to collect payment and see if they had any changes for the next week's ad. They had run the same basic ad for years just making the occasional price change and changing the weekly specials now and then. He felt he had a good relationship with the customer and that they often talked about the local sports teams. When I asked him how often he talked to them about their business he told me "they know what they want to do" and that they were busy so he didn't want to bother them. I resisted the temptation to say, "They know what they want to do alright; they want to advertise with a competitor!" To carry out the "putting out fires" analogy further, like any good "fireman," I have learned that the best way to handle "fires" is to prevent them.

As a young sales rep, my sales manager was fond of saying, "Customers aren't statues; don't take them for granite (granted)!" This may be the cheesiest thing anyone ever said about selling, but I've always found it to be very sound advice. We jump through hoops to land a new advertiser. We prepare presentations to demonstrate the value of our publications, we put together plans to promote their business and we ask them about their needs. All good sales people love the challenge of selling a new account. To be successful in the long term, we must also hold on to our existing advertisers. This just makes good business sense. We can only justify the large amount of time

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required to land a new account by spreading out our “investment” over time. Regular accounts create a base for our business, guaranteeing a sales rep a steady income.

Avoid Surprises

Someone once told me “In life there are two kinds of surprises, one is the good kind when people jump up and sing Happy Birthday and then there is the ... other kind.” As a sales person, you want to avoid the “other kind” of surprise. The best way to do this is to constantly ask questions. Business situations change constantly and you need to stay in tune with what is going on in your customer’s world. Neither you or the customer have time for a long interview on every call, but you always have time to ask, “Is there anything coming up that I should know about?” Pay attention to what’s going on in the economy and in the area and ask your client, “How is the highway construction affecting your business?” or “Does the tight credit market have an effect on your business?” This not only keeps you up to date but also demonstrates your interest in the customer’s situation.

The most important question to ask a customer is “How am I doing?” Customers may be reticent to share negative feedback about your product. Many people try to avoid confrontation and do not want to be seen as complainers. Doctors recommend regular examinations because they know that if they can discover a problem in its early stages, curing the problem will be much less painful and their chances of saving the patient will be much better. The same is true in sales. Discovering that a customer is not pleased with the response to their ad early on allows you the time to tinker with their copy or to try different approaches. Wait until it is time to renew their program and it may be too late to “save the patient.” Customer feedback also provides the information you need to become a better sales person.

Every call is a sales call

I spend a lot of my time in the field with sales people. I’ll jump in the car with a rep and ask them what they’ve planned for the day. I often hear “Nothing exciting today, I’m just going to do a lot of *service calls* to drop off tear pages or collect.” The phrase *service calls* has a “fingernails on the chalkboard” effect on me. I believe every interaction with an advertiser or a prospect is a sales call. Salespeople should never waste an opportunity to learn something about a customer or to tell the customer something new about their publication. Psychologists use the term “hedonic adaptation” to describe the human

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tendency to quickly become dissatisfied with their current situation. This is why people who purchase their “dream home” soon start dreaming of a bigger home in a better neighborhood. This is also why businesses soon forget why they started to advertise with you in the first place. They start thinking that consumers just naturally gravitate to their business and would do so even if they didn’t advertise. If you do a “drive-by call” grabbing their check and shouting thanks as you run out the door, you’ve done nothing to remind them why they need to advertise. Even if you are pressed for time, take the time to make a value statement such as, “Thank you, and remember this keeps your business in front of X thousands of local consumers.” We tell our customers that frequency is important if people are going to remember their ads; the same is true for us, repeat your value proposition every time you are with a customer.

A lot of sales people are reluctant to up-sell an advertiser because they don’t want to “rock the boat.” This is a mistake. Presenting a new program to a customer gives you an opportunity to remind the customer of the benefits of your paper. It also creates an opportunity to show new ideas to the customer. Presenting new ideas reminds the customer why they advertise with you. Even if they don’t buy, they may incorporate the new ideas into the existing program. This solidifies your relationship with the advertiser and who knows; they may surprise you and decide to buy that bigger ad.

Looking ahead

Good sales people see themselves as partners in their customer’s businesses. Great sales people have customers who see their reps as partners in their business. To be their partner you must demonstrate your interest in the continued success of their enterprise. The best way to accomplish this is to schedule a planning session with your customers at regular intervals. During a regular call you can say, “Mr. /Ms. Customer the next quarter is almost here, it’s time we sit down to talk about your goals and what I can do to help you reach them.” You should do this at regular intervals, quarterly, at the change of the season, before holidays, etc. A customer making a big change such as an expansion or taking on a new product line is another reason to get together with them. Prepare for the meeting with new ad ideas and any pertinent research. This sets you apart from the average sales person. Instead of being that person who “takes the money and runs,” you will be the person who helps them plan for the future of their business and who brings them valuable ideas.

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Make a personal connection

We don't sell ads to businesses; we sell to people. You should make a point of getting to know your advertisers as individuals. Entrepreneur and writer Harvey MacKay had his sales people complete a "MacKay 66" questionnaire for each of their clients. This form (Available on the web) not only details the customer's business objectives but also contains a lot of personal details about them such as their birth date and the names of their family. Most decisions are based on emotions rather than pure logic. If you have a personal connection with the customer they are much less likely to drop you in favor of a competitor. Take the time to get to know them personally. Check out their Facebook and LinkedIn pages. Buying a cupcake and a candle for their birthday may be the best investment you can make.

Conclusion

Because acquiring new business is so difficult, it makes very good sense to hold on to the old ones. By being genuinely interested in making our customers successful, we assure our own continued success. If we are aggressive at finding new business and take care of our existing accounts we cannot fail. Like the song my daughter learned in the Girl Scouts says, "Make new friends and keep the old, one is silver and the other gold."

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

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