

Remote selling behavioural tips & advice

With major changes for many in how to go about sales calls, where do you start?



LOADING SALE

Introduction

Inside sales models and the process of identifying, nurturing and turning leads into customers remotely, instead of through face-to-face meetings, has become increasingly important for many sectors. The reality for many field sales teams as the spread of Covid-19 drives them and their clients to adopt travel bans and social distancing policies, is to start functioning more like an inside sales team.

So, as a new era starts with major changes for many in how to go about their sales calls, let's take a look at some basic techniques that have been developed and perfected by remote sales teams for contacting a customer by phone, virtually or via other remote functions.

Planning the call

Not having a structure to keep you on track can result in wasting time, alienating precious prospects, acting unprofessionally on the phone, feeling under pressure and being less productive than you would like.

Planning for a call can be an unpopular task, after all, you're 'only' making a call. But taking a few minutes to think through the structure and purpose of your call can really help you to achieve your call objectives – assuming you know what they are! When developing your sales call plan, consider the following elements:

- **Strategic use of all the contacts you know in a particular account** – think about whom you are more likely to get hold of, how likely they are to answer your call and help with your route to decision or decision maker etc.
- **Your call objective** – what are you actually 'selling' in your call. Some examples might be – are you looking for willingness to pass you on to the next person, or to arrange another appointment with a colleague? A good idea here is to work out both a primary and secondary objective for your call to give you more of a sense of achievement as you will not have to rely on pressing for just one outcome. For instance:

1. **Primary objective** – to get an appointment (to meet or arrange another call with a decision maker)
 2. **Secondary objective** – to try to establish the names of other people in the organisation who may be able to help you.
- **Credibility statements** – these statements are described in many ways - 'value propositions', 'hooks', 'elevator pitches' and can be used for whatever your call objective is – these often make up the basis for why your prospect or customer allows you the time to talk to them so they're an important consideration. Your credibility statement should include a solid business reason for your call, stating how your product or solution will add value, by either:
1. solving a problem
 2. meeting a need
 3. being relevant to the prospect and their role
 4. being linked to your sales objective
 5. being linked where possible to previous contacts or conversations.

Gatekeepers

If you treat these people as 'barriers' and behave aggressively or arrogantly towards them, this can result in an out of control spiral, stopping you from achieving your objectives. These gatekeepers can lock the gate on you! Gatekeepers are only doing their job, so it's more effective to work out strategies for working with them rather than against them. Gatekeepers do not block all communication with the people they serve - they won't block calls that are useful to the people they protect. So, it is necessary for salespeople to provide clear value to the gatekeeper that will allow them to justify letting the salesperson have a meaningful conversation. This means that the purpose of the call as we have discussed earlier is vital to pass through the gatekeeper and reach the desired contact.

It is important to help the gatekeeper do their job efficiently. Taking time to explain the purpose of the call and the value it will bring, helps us to establish rapport with them.

In the case that the gatekeeper doubts the value we can bring and does not allow the call to be passed to the contact, it is sometimes useful to ask if you can send an email so they can forward it on. This allows them to feel in control, and allows the salesperson to know the name of the gatekeeper and use it in future conversations to create a relationship with them.

Empathy on the telephone

One problem some people encounter when using the telephone for sales is ensuring a normal and relaxed tone of voice. Frequently telephone salespeople are encouraged to use scripts. However, the use of scripts frequently engenders an unnatural tone of voice and a very stilted conversation. The best advice is to plan for the call before picking up the phone, understanding the objective and the topics of conversation that the salesperson wishes to address. Then putting away the notes and addressing the call with a clean sheet of paper (or, if Huthwaite trained, a T-form).

Nerves tend to make the voice higher in pitch and this can be very noticeable in a telephone conversation. Professional speakers use warm drinks such as tea to relax the vocal cords and deepen the voice. Taking a deep breath before picking up the phone and smiling as we start to speak helps to relax the conversation and the person on the other end of the telephone.

Body language cannot be observed but tone of voice can be interpreted, so listen carefully for clues to re-enforce the customer's words from their tone of voice. Using active listening is also key to ensuring that the customer is aware that we are interested in helping them. We demonstrate active listening by acknowledging their statements. Acknowledging is not the same as supporting, by acknowledging we show we are listening but do not necessarily show agreement. Using phrases such as 'I understand', or

paraphrasing the customer statements show that we are aware of their opinion and their thoughts without necessarily agreeing with them. Taking care to allow the customer to fully express themselves, especially if they are agitated or excited, is key to defusing the situation.

If we must disagree with them, we should take care to make a positive statement before and after the disagreement. This means saying things like 'I fully understand what you're saying, and will do my best to help. However, I will need some time to investigate the situation. Let me come back to you in X time to tell you what we have achieved'

Finally, practice makes perfect. Practising with a friend or colleague can help to produce the relaxed tone of voice necessary to sound sympathetic and authentic on the telephone.

Is this the right time?

As we mentioned previously, our customer is not usually expecting our call. Consequently, they will be doing other activities which we are interrupting. Listening empathically to their tone of voice, their surroundings and background noise, it is usually fairly easy to detect nervousness and possibly discomfort at taking our call. As soon as we detect that nervousness, we should give control to the customer to end the call by asking whether it is a good time to speak, or when would be a good time for us to repeat the call. It is important not to ask this question too soon in the introduction, since we will probably not have the time to establish the value of the call with the customer and will increase the possibility of them refusing to complete the conversation.

This brings us to the question of how often we should call our customers. This depends on the type of call that we are making, the type of product that we are selling, and our relationship with the customer. We should judge the value to our customer of our call. The less valuable the call the longer the space between calls. Setting times for follow-up calls with the customer can help to reduce the sensation in the customer of being disturbed by the frequency of our calls.

Developing the conversation

As in all sales conversations, showing an interest in the customers' goals, problems and needs is vital in order to develop a relationship. To demonstrate that interest, it is necessary to develop questions around the customers' business. Huthwaite International's SPIN® Selling technique allows salespeople to prepare an interesting conversation with the customer that will uncover and develop potential problems, and eventually lead to the discovery of important needs that will help the customer achieve their goals.

Huthwaite discovered that using the SPIN® Selling technique helps to increase sales effectiveness, and it is also clear that this methodology, based on verbal behaviours, is perfectly suited to a telephone conversation. Asking the right questions at the right moment can transform the telephone call from a boring and potentially unwanted sales pitch, into a valuable conversation for the customer.

Using tools from Huthwaite International's SPIN® Selling toolbox will allow salespeople to understand how they can develop significant needs for the important differentiators of their products and solutions. Those tools help to prepare a conversation around potential areas of customer goals, problems and needs, before even picking up the telephone.

Negotiating on the phone

Negotiations on the telephone, in the same way as negotiations face-to-face are based on three basic principles.

1. Preparation and planning
2. Tactics and strategies
3. Verbal behavioural skills

Frequently salespeople tend to begin a negotiation before establishing clearly the value to the customer of their products or services. Using Huthwaite International's SPIN selling skills allows salespeople to build true value to the customer before entering into a negotiation. This increases the sensation of power on behalf of the salesperson and allows a true evaluation of how much the customer should pay for the product or service being offered.

But however strongly we position ourselves during the sales process, negotiations are likely to occur. In the research into what world-class negotiators do differently, Huthwaite discovered that though most people prepare for negotiations, they spend less time planning how to use information during the negotiation itself. Power is in the head and our behaviours during a negotiation on the telephone can strongly influence the results. Customers will use tactics to try to influence our perception of power and adequate planning to counteract those tactics is key to success..

Despite the restrictions imposed on travel due to the coronavirus pandemic, if we want to reduce the effect on our economy, our industries, and recover quickly, it is going to be necessary for us to adapt our profession to these new circumstances now and for the future. Using remote selling as a tool to overcome travel restrictions and continue to serve our customers is going to be imperative.

What next?

If you would like an informal discussion with us about how you might approach a sales or negotiation skills improvement programme in your business, please get in touch.

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