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### 5 Key Ways to Improve Your Sales Call Results

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By Larry Prevost, ProspeX Sales Coach

Last week, we held a sales coaching session with one of our sports clients. The topic of discussion was opening the sales call. The event reinforced the emphasis our organization places on the opening of the sales call and the importance of getting the prospect's attention immediately in this attention-starved age.

In that session, participants performed an exercise where we presented them with an unknown situation as they initiated their call. When they opened their call, we "connected" them either with the gatekeeper, their target contact, or directly into voicemail. From there, they had to navigate their way to their target contact and deliver a request for a meeting.

The results were inconsistent, yet enlightening. Some were able to navigate their way through the maze, reach their target audience and present their message. Some stumbled through the process but were able to salvage the effort and make it to the finish line. And some tangled themselves up right out of the gate.

The exercise revealed the need to reinforce new behaviors—and that established communication patterns are difficult to break, especially the ones we learned early in life.

We touched on a few of these points in the past, but after reviewing the exercise, we picked up a few more that may be of help to you in when initiating your sales process.

Here are five ideas to keep in mind when you start a sales call:

#### 1. No One Is Sitting by the Phone Waiting for Your Call

Your prospects have a lot on their minds. In fact, the further up the decision-making chain you go, the more they are preoccupied with other issues. When you call, you are an unwanted interruption, sometimes even if you have taken steps to set up the call beforehand. There are a few exceptions to this. Your contact will be sitting by the phone waiting for a call:

- a. From a current client that has a major business support issue.
- b. From one of their team members establishing a conference call for a sales presentation to a major prospect.
- c. From a consultant or advisor whose opinion they value.

There are probably other exceptions, but they will all have a couple of things in common. The person waiting for the call values the person or event they are waiting for, and somebody set up a time and day before the phone meeting. Your prospect is waiting for a valuable, planned-for event.

**Solution.** If you are making a call to a potential sizable account, your best move is to establish a mindset of anticipation in your contact before you make the call. Just like the three examples above, your call has to be valuable *from their perspective*, and it has to be planned-for, both of which are difficult to establish when making prospecting calls. However, using online reputation management techniques, social media, and direct mail marketing, you can portray yourself as someone who has valuable insight. From there, you can initiate a conversation and ask for a phone or face-to-face meeting.

#### 2. No One Cares Who You Are or Where You Work

One of the challenges we saw in our exercise was how participants initiated the conversation when they got a live person on the phone. The most common opening was "Hi Bob. This is John Doe from Acme Rocket Packs. How are you today?"

You probably learned this opening before you started your career and you've reinforced it every day you talk to other people. Since it is so common, the response you get is also common and boring. If you want to get a different response from your audience, do something different. Your target audience wants individual solutions that reflect their unique needs. They don't want the standard, one-size-fits-all approach. Using a common scripted opening is a sign that you didn't do your research and displays a lack of creativity.

Will there be times where you will want to open with a standard opening? Sure there are. However, you don't want to fall into a habit and use the same thing all of the time. Keep yourself engaged and you'll engage your target audience as well.

**Solution:** When you make your call, open it with a colorful fact or statistic about their industry that will startle them. Open with a compliment on their position within the industry. Tell them something that is different from what they are accustomed to hearing and wake them up. Dry facts by themselves won't wake up your contact. A meaningless name won't shake them from their preoccupation either. The only way you'll shake them loose from the grip of preoccupation is by getting in their head and talking to them about their

activity and interests.

Next Page: Treat the "Gatekeeper" With Respect

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#### 3. Treat the "Gatekeeper" With Respect

At one time, sales reps treated the "gatekeeper" as an obstacle they needed to overcome. The economics of the new millennium have changed that. Think like a business owner and review the economics. At this time, business owners are looking to streamline their processes and produce a profit while cutting costs. Would they really expand their payroll expense by hiring someone just to answer phones and route calls when a machine can do it at a fraction of the cost?

If your target audience is high enough in the corporate ladder to have a gatekeeper, that gatekeeper is doing a lot more than just screening calls. Take some time to know them because that gatekeeper is a decision-maker, too. They are the people who decide where to route your calls.

**Solution:** Develop your communication skills. Be polite, friendly and professional. Remember that you are there to conduct business. However, that doesn't mean you should be rude or dismissive for the sake of efficiency. Keep the level of conversation appropriate to the audience. Engage your gatekeeper and leverage their knowledge and expertise. If necessary, join a Toastmasters group and get some time speaking in front of a diverse group of people. You will quickly learn how to read your audience and gauge your presentations accordingly.

#### 4. Expected Activities in Fact-To-Face Meetings Don't Always Migrate Well in Phone Meetings

There are certain activities and procedures that we use when meeting people face-to-face. Little things like smiling, asking how the other person is doing, making small talk while asking business questions, and watching for their responses so you can respond in kind. We can do these in a face-to-face encounter because we are consuming and processing information from all of our senses simultaneously.

In a phone conversation, however, we gather and structure information in a linear fashion. And all of it is auditory. The visual information is gone. Even in a video conference, the range of visual information we can gather from the periphery is limited to the narrow scope of the camera and is sadly lacking when compared to being present physically.

Given these limitations, some of the communication processes that worked so well in a face-to-face meeting don't work as well or at all when conducted over the phone. For instance, when you meet someone at a networking event, you can use the opening, "Hi Bob. John Doe from Acme Rocket Packs." You are standing in front of them in their field of vision. You are looking at their face and they are looking at yours. However, you need to understand that the phrase didn't get their attention, your physical presence did. When you get on the phone where you can't leverage your physical presence, that verbal opening will cease to influence your contact. We use the same opening simply because it's something that we've always done.

**Solution:** Rethink your phone communications and ask yourself: Do I have their attention? How can I get their attention? How will I know when I have their attention? How can I say what I need to say to hold their attention?

Don't count on what you've said in your face-to-face meetings to work for your phone communications. Most of the time, it won't.

#### 5. Get Rid of Filler Words

Another verbal habit that we heard from our participants was unnecessary words and verbal patterns. They used them primarily out of habit; to accommodate for feelings of fear, inadequacy, or to buy some think time. One of those words we looked at in a past article: the word "like." Another word we heard during this particular session was the word "great," used after every response that the prospect made. For instance:

Jane: Bob. Jane Doe from Wyle E. Coyote Ball Bearings. How are you today?

Bob: I'm doing all right.

Jane: Great! Bob, do you have some time to talk today?

Bob: Sure, I have a few minutes.

Jane: Great!

You have only a short amount of time to get your prospect's attention on the phone. Once you have it, you have to constantly work to hold it. Practice verbal brevity. Don't waste your time with words you don't need.

**Solution:** Sit down with another member of your sales team. Deliver your sales call opening to them and have them listen for regular patterns and words that you are using as a crutch. Typically, these are words that make you feel comfortable but don't convey any value to your prospect. Then, have your partner give you a review at the end of your opening,

identifying any patterns that detracted or slowed your presentation.

Remember that this is not an exercise to see how quickly you can deliver your opening. It's about effectively conveying your value and removing anything that will get in the way of that message. Check your habits, get rid of the ones that aren't necessary, and convey what you mean with verbal brevity.

**About the Author:** Larry Prevost is a sales and communication coach and manages the online sales community for ProspeX.

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