

A Matter Of Responsibility

I was mean to a salesperson this morning. I'm sure that's what she thought anyway. For sure, the conversation didn't go as she planned.

"Hi Dave," she said. "This is Monica from ABCo." (Not their real names.) "The reason I'm calling is, we haven't heard from you for a while."

My response: "And why do you think that is?"

Her response, after a bit of a delay: "Uh, I don't know. Uh, that's why I'm calling?"

Note the two "Uh's" and the question mark. Obviously she wasn't prepared for my response. I believe she could have been. I also believe her strategy was flawed from the start.

Fundamental Concept

Here's a very fundamental concept. It is *never* the buyer's responsibility to communicate with the seller. It is *always* the seller's responsibility to communicate with the buyer.

That actually means two things. The first is that it's never their responsibility to understand you. It's always your responsibility to understand them, to make sure that real communication happens. That's an issue when printing salespeople use printing industry jargon in their conversations with prospects or customers, without ensuring that everyone fully understands what's being said.

The second meaning is more directly related to the call I got this morning. It's not their responsibility to stay in touch with you. It's the other way around!

Interval Strategy

I recommend establishing a contact interval for at least your most important customers. By that, I mean some number of weeks that you never let go by without either you hearing from them, or them hearing from you. The interval should consider how frequently you typically interact with them, just in the normal flow of doing business. With a customer who typically places orders every week, that might be a two week interval. With a customer who orders every couple of months, it might be a 12 week interval. The goal is an interval long enough to keep from smothering them, but short enough to make sure that nothing bad happens without you finding out in time to do something about it!

It's also important to have something better to say than "we haven't heard from you for a while." You want these calls to add value to the relationship, not subtract it. Calling to ensure customer satisfaction adds value. Calling to thank someone for their business adds value. Calling to educate the customer adds value. Even calling to say Happy Birthday adds value. Calling to demand an answer to "Why haven't we heard from you?" definitely doesn't.

OK, maybe *demand* it too strong a word. But maybe it isn't. Do you want to take that risk?

Preparation

As noted, I believe that this salesperson could have been better prepared for today's call. She could have asked herself, before dialing, if there was any reason to suspect a problem. If that was the case, she could have said something like this:

"Hi Dave. Listen, I realized today that it's been longer than normal since you've placed an order with us. Now, I know that might just be the flow of your business, but I'm concerned that it might be because we let you down in some way. If we did, I'm here to deal with that. Is there something you need me to look into?"

Here's another very fundamental concept: The customer who complains is doing you a favor! That's a much better situation than having them simply take their business elsewhere. But remember, it's not their *responsibility* to complain. It's your *responsibility* to give them the *opportunity* to complain if a complaint is justified!

One of my favorite sales coaching clients embraces this responsibility fully, adding her own personal style. "Hello," she'll say. "This is your regularly scheduled Complaint Call. I'm hoping you haven't got any, but if you do, I want hear them!"

Wouldn't you say that's better strategy than the call I got this morning?