

No Soliciting!

As many quick printers know, I'm a very strong believer in physical cold calling as part of the printing sales process. When I start to talk about cold calling in seminars, one of the questions I'm often asked is "What do I do when I come to one of those office buildings that has a *No Soliciting* sign on the door or in the lobby?"

My answer is that unless there's someone there to physically stop you, I think you should walk on by the sign and make your calls.

Am I encouraging you to do something illegal or unethical? No, I don't think so. I think it's more a matter of encouraging you to leave no appropriate stone unturned in your efforts to build business. As a salesman, I walked by those signs myself because I wasn't willing to accept that anyone had the right to tell me where I could or couldn't sell. And the sum of my experience was that I very seldom met any resistance to my presence beyond those signs.

Whose Idea

I'm sure that part of the reason for my acceptance beyond the No Soliciting signs was the way that I handled myself when I entered an office or business, and I'll talk more about cold call technique in just a moment. There's something else I've learned, though, that has a bearing on this situation.

Have you ever stopped and thought about who it is that puts those signs there in the first place? Is it the tenants of the building, all banding together in a conscious effort to insulate themselves from salespeople? What I've learned is that it's usually the builder of the building, or the management company that rents out office space. The sign is often ordered during the construction phase in modern building practice, on the theory that a *No Soliciting* policy will make the building more attractive to prospective tenants.

Where did that idea come from? I can only tell you this. I have a sign manufacturer as a client, and the *No Soliciting* sign is one that they always make it a point to suggest in an office building if it's not called for on the original plans...which it often is not.

What do you think about the idea that you may have been intimidated—and kept out of a building full of potential customers—by some sign guy's strategy for increasing his own sales?

Obstacle Course

As printing salespeople—and printing sales managers—most of us realize that we're in the business of handling objections. That's ultimately how we create customers, by digging out the reasons why people are not buying from us, and changing their minds.

But what if you never even get that far? What if you don't get a chance to ask the important questions and bring your convincing skills to bear? That's where the greatest measure of printing sales opportunity is lost, not by failing to convince, but by failing to get beyond the obstacles placed in the way of face-to-face contact with the person who makes the buying decisions.

I've never done anything more than informal research on the question of what salespeople perceive as their most difficult obstacles. But while the research has been informal, the results have been consistent, and I'm willing to bet that any broad-based survey of printing salespeople would identify secretaries and receptionists as the greatest obstacles to prospecting and customer-building success. These are the people who make up the prospect's "first line of defense."

Best Friend Or Worst Enemy

However, having said that, I'm also willing to bet that if you ran a separate survey and asked salespeople to identify their most important ally in the places where they've been successful in prospecting and selling, many would identify the same category of people—the secretaries and receptionists.

The lesson here is pretty basic. The first person you find inside a prospect's door is very likely to be either your best friend or your worst enemy in your effort to do business with that prospect. And the first words out of your mouth will usually determine which way that will go.

The Right Kind Of Cold Call

There are some kinds of obstacles—like the No Soliciting sign—that will only hold you back if you let them. My experience is that most secretaries and receptionists will only hold you back if you make them! How do you do

that...or more importantly, how do you not do that? Well, the best way I know of to bring out the worst in a secretary or receptionist is to charge into their workplace demanding an opportunity to sell.

The truth is that you probably shouldn't even be expecting an opportunity to sell. But that's good, because I've always said that the worst thing that can happen to you on a cold call is to actually see the buyer and be forced to make your presentation.

Think about this! The sale and purchase of printing is based on a relationship of trust and confidence between buyer and printer. It takes time to build that kind of relationship, usually much more time than you'll get or even need to make a cold call presentation. Why would you ever want to make your presentation—which is the equivalent of firing your main persuasive guns—until you'd "primed" your prospect with some evidence of your worthiness of his or her trust and confidence.

If you understand that, I think you'll agree that your goal on a cold call should not be to make a presentation to the buyer. A more reasonable goal—and one, I think, that represents the real purpose and value of a cold call—is to simply start the process that will lead to your ultimate goal. And what is that goal? I think it's a long-lasting relationship built on factors that no competitor can easily overcome.

Learn Something, Leave Something

In the overall sales strategy I teach, every cold call has two component goals. The first goal is to make an ally out of the first person inside the door, not an obstacle. The second goal is to learn something and leave something.

At the very least, you want to learn the name of the person who makes the print buying decisions. And anything else you can learn about the prospect's printing needs or buying habits can be an asset too. As for leaving something, at the very least you leave your business card. I personally like the idea of writing and leaving a short note to the decision maker, letting that person know how you intend to follow up.

And the best way to follow up? I think without question that it's with something through the mail. Because that's what the secretary or receptionist is likely to ask you to do anyway. How often have you been asked, on a cold call or a prospecting phone call, to "send him/her your information" to be evaluated or kept on file?

Here's the logic behind this strategy...the secretary or receptionist may very well put up a defense if you demand, or even appear to expect, an opportunity to sell. And you don't actually want to see the buyer in the first place. So the best approach is to anticipate what you're going to be asked to do, and make that your stated goal.

Magic Words

Now you aren't walking in saying "I'd like to see the person who buys printing" and risking a negative response from the first person you meet. What you are saying now falls into the category of magic words..."I want to send some information about my company to the person who buys printing here. Can you tell me who that person is and help me make sure that I have the right mailing address?"

I have only very rarely had anyone refuse this request. In fact, I've learned some very valuable things about my prospect companies, and even about the people who do the buying. Because, by getting off on the right foot, you dramatically increase the chances of a strong and very helpful alliance. When you sense that the secretary or receptionist you're talking to is receptive, ask a few questions and see what else you can learn. If you don't sense that willingness to provide further information, though, don't press it. You've got a friend so far, don't turn that person into an enemy.

If You're "Caught"

I think you'll find that most people will accept you on a cold call if you're there with the right kind of cold call in mind. I think that's true in any situation, whether there's a No Soliciting sign in the building or not. But what if you're not accepted, and what if someone actually says to you that "soliciting isn't allowed here. Didn't you see the sign?"

One option is to simply apologize and head on your way. That's generally what I've done in the few situations when it's happened to me. I think that's definitely the right thing to do if you perceive anything agitated or even remotely hostile in the person. But there have been a couple of times when I've taken a different option...to smile my "winningest" smile and say that "I'm not really trying to sell anything here, only to get some information to follow up on." Your choice should depend on the same sort of factors, and your own personal selling style.

Are you risking an encounter with the legal system when you're out cold calling? I called my local police station once to ask that question. The answer I got was that the police would be obliged to answer a call from a tenant in a *No Soliciting* building or area, and that if a salesperson were still there, he or she would most likely just be asked to leave. Beyond that, my contact said, unless the salesperson for some reason wanted to give the police officer a hard time, it would be very unlikely that the affair would go any further.

The Bottom Line

I think the bottom line on No Soliciting signs is this...the sign may not reflect the true wishes of all of the tenants in the building. And if it doesn't, you're missing opportunities by letting one keep you from making calls. I encourage you not to let the sign stop you, but be alert for any indication that your presence is a real problem.

The key to effective cold calls beyond one of those signs is the same as the key to effective cold calls in general. Don't turn the first person you meet inside a prospect's door into an obstacle. Anticipate their interests—help them do their job as they understand it—and you'll create an ally instead.

And if you do find a building that is closed to you, maybe one where there's a security guard in the lobby to let you know that they're really serious about the sign? Well, don't despair. There are other ways to make contact with the people inside. Some might involve a little detective work. Others only require a look at the lobby directory. A creative salesperson can usually find a way.

There are still going to be people that you can't convince to become your customers. Every salesperson must recognize the basic truth that you can't sell to everyone. But by getting beyond the obstacles—all of the obstacles—a salesperson will get many more opportunities to be convincing. And that will build sales!