

Driving The Sales Cycle

I went out on a sales call with one of my clients last week. The discussion was mostly about lead generation. The prospect told us that his salespeople closed most of their leads on the first call, and as we were driving away, my client said: "I wish this business was more like that one. Counting e-mails and phone calls and voice mails this is probably the twentieth time I've talked to that guy, and I'm only now getting close to closing the sale."

"Well, he's got a short sales cycle, and you've got a longer one," I said, "but I'm not sure he's any better off than you are. Personally, I'd rather take some time to make a big sale than have to make a whole bunch of small ones every day. And remember, you're not selling a simple, one-time product like he is. In fact, you're not selling a product at all. You're selling an idea—the idea that you should be his printer!—and if you make that sale, the longer sales cycle also corresponds to a lot more value for you."

"I understand that," he said, "but I'm just sayin', I wish I could shorten my sales cycle even a little bit. Tell me the short cut!"

"There are no short cuts," I said. "But there are ways to accelerate the process. And the best way is probably to drive smoothly, to have a plan, and to eliminate the stops and starts that slow everything down."

Stops and Starts

Here's a classic situation. A salesperson identifies a prospect and makes a couple of attempts at contact. There's no immediate gratification—a meeting, or at least a return phone call or e-mail—so the effort stops until the salesperson happens to look back on his/her "prospect list" at some point and says "Hey, I haven't tried this person for a while." So the cycle starts again, probably with a similar result.

Please believe me, calling out of the blue at irregular intervals is not a recipe for printing sales success. There's an analogy here to the "bell curve" that defines most successful advertising. The first few "touches" don't generate a great deal of response, but a series of touches—if done correctly!—can build on each other. If the interval is too long, though, you don't get the building effect.

And, of course, if the message isn't relevant/interesting/compelling, you don't anything.

The Message

Here's another important factor. The message you want to convey is too complex to communicate in a single burst. But that's OK, because it gives you what I think is a very logical progression.

First touch: *I'd like to talk to you about your printing needs.*

Second touch: *I'd like to talk to you about your printing needs, because...*

Third touch: *Here's how I think talking with me would benefit you...*

Fourth touch: *Am I barking up the wrong tree here?*

What I hope you'll see is that the first touch is a simple statement of what you want. Obviously, it's great if they say "Sure, let's do that." But what if they don't, or if they don't return your call or e-mail. The thought process you must have is "OK, that didn't work, so let me explain why I want what I want." For example: *I'd like to talk to you about your printing needs because that's proven to be the best way for me to identify some want or need that could be better served than it is right now.*

Now, what if that doesn't get you where you're hoping to go? The third touch represents a transition from what *you* want to how it might benefit *them*. It's been proven in commerce—and in just about every other aspect of life—that the best way to get someone to do what you want them to do is to position what you want as a benefit to them.

I wish I could tell you that this always works, but sadly, there's nothing in selling that works every single time. Which takes us to the fourth touch, which essentially gives them the opportunity to come right out and tell you they're not interested. Is that a desirable outcome? Of course not, but if it's true, you're better off knowing it sooner rather than later, right?

Bottom Line

A long sales cycle is simply a reality of printing sales. That means you have to fill the cycle with building blocks, so that each touch adds something to the relationship you're trying to build. *Accelerate* is a key word here, but so is *escalate*; in other words, the best strategy involves taking every touch up a notch.

And don't forget that a long sales cycle suggests an even longer customer relationship when you do succeed!