

Taking It One Challenge At A Time

There are very few shortcuts in selling, and there's a name for the type of salesperson who is always looking for shortcuts. We call them underachievers! The smart salesperson knows that he/she will have to touch all the bases with just about every prospect in order to turn that prospect into a customer.

Selling successfully is not a single challenge. It's a series of challenges, and the best way to approach these challenges is to take them one at a time.

The First Challenge

What's the very first challenge you face when your objective is to develop a new customer? Many salespeople will tell you that it's "qualifying" a prospect, but I tend to look at it a little differently. I think "qualifying" is less important to a printing salesperson than it is to, say, a salesperson representing a large commercial printing company...at least initially.

That's because your definition of who would make a good customer is much broader than that salesperson's. He/she would place very little value on a prospect who spends \$1000-\$2000 on printing every year, with much of that being letterhead, envelopes, business cards, and other basic business printing and/or copying, and I think you should consider a company like that highly "qualified."

I also hope you'll agree that most of the companies operating in your market area have the potential to buy that much printing—or more!—at least from what you can see from outside their doors. Yes, many companies don't actually use that much printing. (Or they do, but they get it from their "home office" outside of your area.) The point I want to make is that it's not very smart to try to "qualify" from the outside. To do it most effectively, you have to get inside!

I think you should work from the premise that any company doing business in your area is worth looking at, based on potential alone. From that point, your first selling challenge is to *identify the decision-maker*...the person you're ultimately going to have to sell to.

How do you do that? The best way I know of is to walk right into every building or office in your market area and ask the first person you meet—usually a receptionist or secretary—to help you. Tell this "gatekeeper" *who you are and what you want*...which I think should go something like this: "*Hi, I'm (your name) from ABC Printing, and I would like to send some information about our company in the mail to your company. Can you tell me who I should be sending that to?*"

I think you'll find that most gatekeepers will be cooperative, especially since you're not walking in and asking them to interrupt the printing buyer (someone who's probably at least a little higher in the "food chain" in this company than the gatekeeper is!) I think you'll also find that most gatekeepers can tell you something about their company's printing needs and buying habits, which will help you to further "qualify" the prospect.

The Second Challenge

After identifying the decision-maker—and deciding that a prospect is worth taking the next step with—what's the next specific challenge that you face? Many salespeople would answer that it's getting an appointment, but they would be wrong! Getting an appointment turns out to be the third challenge, because in between identifying the decision-maker and getting an appointment is the challenge of *getting the decision-maker to take your phone call in the first place!*

Think about it and I'm sure you'll agree. When you're dealing with busy people—and their voice mail systems—just making a telephone connection is a major challenge. (For advice on dealing with voice mail, look back at my article titled "Who's Got The Voice Mail Blues?")

Try this to increase the likelihood that people will take your phone calls in the first place. Send a letter in between identifying the decision-maker and calling to ask for an appointment. It doesn't have to be a long letter, in fact, shorter is better. The ideal letter would communicate three things: (1) You did your research and learned that the person you're writing to is the decision-maker; (2) You feel that a relationship with your company will bring a specific benefit to the prospect; and (3) You'll be calling soon to ask for an appointment. Do you see how a letter like this will "warm up" your eventual phone call, and make it easier to meet the challenge of getting an appointment?

The Next Challenge

Once you get an appointment, the next challenge you face is to *convince and sell*, and I'm not going to try to tell you today how to meet that challenge—except to say to go in on your first face-to-face opportunity and ask plenty of questions. If you ask the right questions, your prospect will tell you what it will take to *convince and sell* (or else tell you something that will convince you that it's not going to happen, which is another part of the “qualifying” process.)

The message I hope I got across today is about “positioning” yourself for more face-to-face conversations by meeting each of the early challenges in the selling process, and not looking for shortcuts that don't exist!