

EFFECTIVE SELLING

Starting a new business means many new skills may have to be learnt, none more important than that of selling, for without customers there will be no business to run. It's good to remind oneself at the outset that the main objective must be to SELL the product or service – making it and providing it are truly secondary! Most new businesses do not start with full order books but must reach that happy state by employing the most effective combination of selling activities they can afford; woe betide the business plan that contains no provision for selling or the cost of doing it.

In the beginning, the emphasis must be on acquiring new business with a package of selling activities that may include advertising, mail shots, leaflet distribution and tele-sales, plus in the right circumstances, demonstrations, seminars or exhibitions. Finding the right package will mean experimenting and may take a year or more to develop; in the first place you may just copy your most successful competitors, assuming that what works for them should work for you. Remember there will be a delay of up to a year before you can get into directories like the Golden Pages so plan to use more instant media meanwhile. All this is about finding customers or helping them to find you and it is the most expensive and time-consuming part of selling activities.

PROSPECTING

Identifying potential customers should be part systematic – using directories, mailing lists, trade journals and statistical material, and part opportunist, which means keeping your eyes and ears open for names, news articles, advertisements and even gossip – it is surprising how much you can learn from other sales people's conversations. Use your own and your friends stock of contacts, ask every customer for a referral and spend some time every week following up contact and sifting this material.

Armed with a list of prospects, the next job is to make contact – either by making the first move yourself or by persuading people to contact you – by advertising, display, mailing or leaflet drops.

If it's up to you to make the first contact – again be systematic. This means putting time aside to call on people, telephoning them or getting them to call on you. Be thorough and don't cherry pick. If you sit down with a list of – say – house builders to call on, make sure you call them all and work through the list from top to bottom. Most sales people make a plan for the week ahead so that by Friday of one week, they have at least got a schedule of work for the following week, including some appointments, some desk and telephone work and some following up on their previous contacts. Using the telephone to get appointment is a job that can often be best done for you by skilled tele-sales persons, but if you make your own appointments practise a simple, clear presentation that makes it difficult for your prospects to say "no", and remember to sell only the appointment – not the product or service.

Make sure you are contacting the right person – does he or she have the money or access to it – do they have the authority to make the decision to buy and most importantly, might they have a need that you can satisfy – perhaps not fully recognised by them, but certainly by you. Establishing this may need skilful

questioning, so have your approach worked out in advance and always start at the top – don't travel one hundred miles to see someone who has been really easy to approach but is not able to influence the buying decision.

Whilst building your appointment schedule, make sure you build a sensible journey plan to keep non-productive travelling time to a minimum and selling time to a maximum. Have a standby plan in the event that an appointment falls through or finishes early – can you make some cold calls, collect a few valuable contact names – drop a few leaflets perhaps?

SELLING AND NEGOTIATING

It's important to get into the right frame of mind before you meet your prospect. Have an objective – to get the order, a commitment to an order, or at least to resolve objections and difficulties.

Think positively – you are going to succeed and you are not there with a begging bowl – this is a meeting of responsible equals during which the prospect will come to understand how useful you are to each other. Remember customers are not always right, but must be allowed to think they are.

Be prepared – have your sample literature, prices and other sales aids organised and in pristine condition – no dog eared business cards or torn photos please. Can you find out something about your customer's business before you get face-to-face? At least know what business they are in, whether they have other locations, how to pronounce your contact's name (and spell it) and what position he or she holds.

When you first meet try to find some common ground, but briefly – a few questions on the weather, traffic or today's news must not develop into time wasting small talk – watch for signs of interest and/or lack of it. At this stage you should be trying to get the contacts to do the talking – so that you can learn about them, their business and the problems. Why did the contact agree to the interview?

With some rapport developing, you can move ahead with a structured presentation – designed to achieve your objective. First establish your contact's needs, then try and match your products or services to those, suggesting ways in which they and/or their company can realize significant benefits from following your proposals. All the time, watch you don't monopolise things – involve your contact, listen to them and seek advice on the subjects they really know most about – nearly everyone likes to be asked for advice.

If you can start to get agreement on the benefits you can provide, start to try for a commitment – “if we can do this for you, would you be interested?” Ask for the order – perhaps indirectly, by asking your contacts to specify quantities, sizes, colours, timing or whatever is relative to the order they might place. Then stop talking and wait for them to say the next sentence. It should open the door for you.

When you do start to negotiate the terms of an order, remind yourself not to accept any condition you will not be able to keep, or which will prove onerous or unprofitable. Be honest, stick to what you know you can do and don't let the thought of an order tempt you into making a rod for your own back. Settle all the parameters

whilst you are there, and try to come away with the order, the order number or at least a real commitment. Negotiate as an equal, don't give the house away, and be sure you agree on terms of payment.

The sales process is not over when the order is signed. Keep track of all orders, remember your delivery promises and keep in touch with your customer. If there has to be any deviation from your agreement call them before they call you – it's not only more efficient and courteous – it's easier to break bad news if you take the initiative than when cornered by an irate buyer. For most sales people it should be routine to follow up every delivery or job done – is your customer satisfied? – did they get what they contracted for? – are they using the product? It's of little value to you if they are unable to use it – they probably won't pay you on time, may never order another and will give you a bad name with everyone they meet.

For many businesses, 80% of next years customers will come from this years customers – so look after them!