

How to Set Appointments

A lament I hear often from salespeople is that it is getting harder to set appointments. There are a lot of reasons for this—but the most important reason is that customers just don't have time to waste. This also ties into one of my “heretical” statements: relationship-selling is less important today than it used to be. (Not totally unimportant but definitely less important.)

There used to be a lot emphasis on the “relationship” side of sales. For example, account profile templates used to include things like spouse's name and birthday. And because of this, the value of the sales call began to lessen in the eyes of the customer. Now, with more work and less time, salespeople who have historically relied on relationship are finding it more difficult to get appointments.

The answer to this dilemma is to remember the following: the value provided by a salesperson begins when they ask for an appointment—not when they actually sell a product or service.

The first sale that you have to make is to get the customer to give you some of their time. You do this by selling the value of the appointment. Too often, I've heard salespeople try and set appointments using language like this, “I'll be in your area next week and I'd like to come by and tell you about our products/services.” If you think about how this sounds to the customer, you can see that there is little value for them in this request.

There are two different types of sales appointments—calls on new customers and calls on existing customers. Calls on new customers have an extra layer of difficulty but both require a higher level of preparation now.

Let's start with a few general rules:

- Do “lukewarm” calls rather than cold calls (on new customers)
- Do your homework and have a specific reason for the call
- Try to make it a real sales call—day, time
- Don't ask anyone to call you back

Do “lukewarm” calls rather than cold calls (on new customers)

Try never to make a cold call on a new customer. My recommendation is that you should make at least one call on someone who is not part of the purchasing process first. Talk with someone in their sales or customer service department and learn as much about them as you can before you try to set your first real sales appointment.

Do your homework and have a specific reason for the call

Never ask for a call to “learn about their business” or to “tell them about your new product or service.” And if it's an existing customer, never ask for a call to “see how things are going.” These are all perceived as timewasters by the customer. Spend

some time on the internet; talk with other non-competing salespeople; read the trade magazines of the customer's industry—look for the major problems they are facing and make a specific recommendation to the customer as part of the request for the sales call. A request should sound something like this: "It looks like the things that you are most concerned about are x, y and z. Over the past year, our organization has worked with blank, blank and blank to solve those kinds of problems and the results were... I would like an opportunity to discuss these issues with you and anyone else in the organization that might be involved."

With this approach, you are adding value from the first interaction and distinguishing yourself from most of the other people that call on the customer. (If you are calling on an existing customer, this approach should be easier because you should know a lot about them. Ideally you know your existing customer's business goals and make all of your sales calls support what they are trying to accomplish.)

For a new customer, this takes more effort but normally pays big dividends in trying to get that first appointment.

Try to make it a real sales call—day, time

Whether you get the person or voicemail, always ask for a specific sales appointment. Don't ask for an appointment early next week or sometime on Monday morning. By giving a specific time, you make the appointment seem more real.

Don't ask anyone to call you back

When you have to leave a message, don't ask the customer to call you back. Your call should sound something like this: "I would like to call you/see you at 10:00am on Monday morning and my plan is to call you on Thursday afternoon at 3:30 to confirm and if that's not a convenient time, please call me at 555-5555 and let me know when it would be convenient."

Just remember, you have to sell and demonstrate the value of the sale call. If you spend a little extra time in preparation, you are more likely to get the appointments you want.

Joe

For More Articles by Joe, See Online Library Member's Area