

Chapter I

It's a Numbers Game

I am not judged by the number of times I fail, but by the number of times I succeed: and the number of times I succeed is in direct proportion to the number of times I fail and keep trying.

—Tom Hopkins

Telemarketers tend to have the toughest assignment in sales. They call hundreds of people every day, and get hung up on most of the time. They are insulted or abused more than any other type of salesperson! So why do they do it? Not the telemarketers themselves: we know why they do it. They're part-time workers – retirees and college kids – trying to pay the rent, and maybe put a little aside. But why do businesses invest so much money in teams of telemarketers working round the clock? The answer is obvious. Because it works!

According to the Direct Marketing Association (2004), the telephone, as intrusive as it is, was more than three and a half times as successful a marketing tool for show marketers than direct mail and email combined!¹ Of course, the real numbers are not very high, averaging about 6 percent, but given the amount of calls made, those numbers add up. If 100 calls a day lead to six closes, then 1,000 calls a day could be more than enough to keep you in business.

In fact, most of us get similar results. How many closes do you

¹ This is based on the DMA's 2004 Response Rate Report, which claimed a 7.18% response rate for telemarketers, as opposed to just 1.23% for direct mail to homes, and 0.85% for email. For direct order campaigns, the response rate was slightly lower (5.78%), but still double the combined rates of the other top methods: 3-dimensional mailings, such as promotional items (2.3%) and catalogs (2.18%).

get from each prospect? In media sales – the world that I know best – if you have 20 prospects on your list, 10 of them are worth your time; of these, 5 will get you to someone to talk to, and of those 5, about 3 will deserve an actual proposal. Of those 3, you can usually close with one. In other words, for every twenty prospects you list, you are likely to close just one. The rest is simple math. If your ratio of sales to prospects is 1:20, it is roughly the same of the telemarketers! The biggest difference is that they probably make a lot more calls than you do!

Are you starting to feel like you're in the wrong business? Don't! There are two easy ways to raise your numbers. The first is to go out and get more prospects; the second is to get your closing ratio higher. Both these steps are essential to sales, especially in a down economy. The first thing a sales survivor must do is get those numbers up! You always need to raise the ratio of successful closes to prospects, but even before that, you need to get the number of prospecting calls that you make up. In a down economy, when people are fighting just to keep their numbers on par, how do you go about doing that?

Always Want More!

The numbers that I used above seem about right for most salespeople. They should, because I took actual

“I'm a great believer in luck, and find the more I work the more I have of it.”

— Thomas Jefferson

numbers for media sales that we analyzed right here at the Blinder Group. Are they the right numbers for you? Do you even know what your close-to-prospect ratio is? Do you know how many prospecting calls you make each day, and what kind of results you get from them?

Don't be upset by these questions. Plenty of salespeople don't know their ratios, whether it's per day, per month, or per quarter. So the first thing that you need to do is to figure out your ratios and calculate exactly what kind of results you're getting. The best way to

do this is by using a spreadsheet. While some people like to keep track in their head, it's amazing how much more meaningful these numbers are when you actually see them in front of you. When they're printed on a spreadsheet in black and white, there's absolutely no way you can fudge them around.

In most cases, your boss will expect you to keep track of your calls. If that isn't the case, you can still do it yourself by making a spreadsheet and keeping a record of what actually takes place during each call you make, whether electronically, on the phone, or in person. While sales is a numbers game, what we're counting is *actions*, not just the amount of times that you pick up the receiver and dial a number, or get in your car and drive to meet a customer.

Every call can consist of one or more (hopefully more) of the following five distinct types of actions:

- **Prospecting:** This is the one we all dread: sifting through countless businesses to find the golden leads. Essentially, this is what telemarketing is all about. Telemarketers make hundreds of more or less random calls until they find someone who's even slightly interested, and then they often turn them over to a professional salesperson. By the end of this chapter though, you'll realize that a sales survivor has one great advantage over the average telemarketer: we've taken the term *random* out of the equation.
- **Ascertainment:** This action is essential to determine what your customers really need (more on that later). While everyone realizes how important this is when speaking to new prospects, what too many salespeople forget is that ascertainment is just as important with longtime customers who may have new or changing needs that must also be addressed.

- **The Pitch:** This is the actual mechanics of sales – the very essence of selling – the specific actions that you take to excite your prospects about buying your product. For some salespeople, however, the pitch can be almost as difficult as prospecting. Hopefully, by the end of this book, they’ll realize that it’s actually as easy as ABC ... literally!
- **The Close:** This is the one we’ve all been waiting for: the deal is clinched and you are exchanging products or services for dollars and cents. In fact, all of the previous steps should be leading up to The Close, because this is what sales is all about.
- **Service:** Sales doesn’t end with the Close though. Remember that it takes more energy to find a new customer than to keep a regular customer happy so that he keeps coming back to you for all his future needs. For many salespeople, solving all the customer’s little problems can actually be the easiest part of the job. After all, what can be more relaxing and enjoyable than schmoozing with a satisfied customer and making sure that they are getting the best out of the product you just sold them? Of course, one of the hardest things we sometimes have to do is to train those customers who love to entangle us with their laborious conversations that we really do have lots of work to do, and we can’t spend hours chatting away with them.

Now, with all this in mind, ask yourself how many *actions* – and not just calls – have you actually made today? How many service *actions* did you make to help an existing client, and how many prospecting *actions* did you make, whether to introduce yourself to new business prospects or to see if any of your existing customers can be sold new products or services? Finally, how many of your *actions* were to actually ask for the order?

There is, however, one dangerous trap that many salespeople fall into. Far too often they tend to think of each call having a single purpose. Absolutely not! In fact, every single call you make can include

one or all of the other actions. When you make a service call, you can ask your customer if she knows anyone else who may be interested in that product (*prospecting*) or see if he has other needs (*ascertainment*). You might decide to try *pitching* a new product, and because your customers trust you, they decide to go ahead and place an order (*closing*). This is just one plausible example, so remember, when updating your spreadsheet, count your actions, not your calls!

On that same note, another common mistake that salespeople make is that they prefer to focus more on service than on vital prospecting actions. The reason is obvious: providing service is so much easier. Every one of us has an innate desire to take the easy road and travel the paths that we know best. Remember though that no road is harder than the “easy road” – at least that’s what I’ve always found. So ask yourself, are you really getting more business that way? Is it really improving your numbers? “To thine own self be true.”²

Using your spreadsheet, figure out exactly how many of your calls really are about prospecting, then set yourself goals to get that number higher. When I work with media companies, I insist that each and every one of their salespeople targets twenty new prospects each week, regardless of what else they’re doing. You can insist on this for yourself too. And don’t go easy on yourself with your goals either: As the golfer Jason Tyska once said: “When you set a goal, you want to make it hard on yourself.” You won’t always hit a hole in one, but you won’t be any less the salesperson for trying.

And prospecting really isn’t as hard as it sounds.

2 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene III.

Drawing Bull's-eyes

The more people you call, the more sales you will make. That's plain old common sense. But that doesn't mean you should spend your time

“It is far more important to be able to hit the target than it is to haggle over who makes a weapon or who pulls the trigger.”

— Dwight D. Eisenhower

randomly cold calling, like our friends the telemarketers. Your time is valuable and you want to make the most of it, so make sure each of those calls counts! The best way to do that is to find your market niche.

That should be obvious to anyone, but more often than not, it isn't. Even the best salespeople don't target their potential markets specifically enough. Of course, a man selling fine Kobe beef is not going to target a list of vegan restaurants, but is he considering the economic demographic of the local supermarket? Is a middle class family with a mortgage and five kids to put through college really ready to buy a Ferrari? Yet how many car salesmen go on and on about how great the stereo system is, when they're trying to push a car to the parents of a brood of teenagers?

Salespeople often pitch first, then call whatever they hit their target. I see this all too often in the media business. It's so common to launch new products that I often joke with media sales reps: “How many special sections do you have deadlining today?” Don't get me wrong! Those special sections are great, but they lose their edge if the salespeople call the same old customers over and over again. That's why I'm constantly reminding them to boil down exactly who each new product targets. It's a lot easier than it sounds. In fact, the target can easily be boiled down to four specific groups:

- Young or Old;
- Rich or Poor;
- Near or Far;
- Man or Woman.

Once you know who each special section targets, you will be far more likely to find just the right advertisers for that section – and just as importantly, know who to put on hold until you have something more appropriate for them. In other words, in a down economy sales survivors are the ones who know exactly who they are targeting their products for.

So don't be like the proverbial archer practicing in the woods. With his arms proudly folded across his chest, he's eager to show every passer-by that each of his arrows has hit a bull's-eye. Of course, what he fails to explain is that first he shot the arrow, and only then did he paint a bull's-eye around it. Truly skilled archers (and salespeople) pick their targets first!

You don't know me but ...

If, after you've targeted your potential prospects, you find yourself running out of "low-hanging fruit,"

"In sales a referral is the key to the door of resistance."

— Bo Bennett

don't be afraid to ask your best customers if they know any potential new prospects for you. It's amazing what you can get when you ask, so go ahead and ask them: "I know you're really pleased with my product. Is there anyone else that you think would want it?" I've always found that satisfied customers are eager to share that kind of information, especially if they really are happy with the product you've sold them. If they believe in it as much as you do, they can easily become your greatest advocates.

So get those names from them and name drop: "I was talking to your friend Sue, and she suggested I give you a call. Actually, it's more than just name dropping. It's a personal recommendation and borrowed trust.

Contacts, Contacts Everywhere ...

The amazing thing about potential new leads is that with a little ingenuity, you can find them just about everywhere!

“Who seeks shall find.”

— Sophocles

Hindu scriptures talks of two sleepless sages: Alert and Watchful, ever vigilant and ever searching. While I may not want to be sleepless like them, I do try to imitate their vigilance, so wherever I am, no matter what I am doing, I am always on the lookout for new leads. “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7).

Once you realize how many leads there really are out there, you’ll soon want to carry a pen and pad with you just about everywhere you go. You never know who you’ll meet in the waiting room of your dentist’s office, at your kid’s recital, or at the dinner party that you couldn’t squirm out of. Of course, there are some places where that might not be particularly appropriate. In most churches that I know, for instance, the congregation tends to frown upon people who start discussing business during the sermon. Still, the contacts are there, so if someone really catches your attention, make a mental note of it, and jot the relevant information down when you “run to the restroom.”

As a sales manager, I always asked my team when they came back from their meetings if they dropped off their cards at all the neighboring businesses. This can be especially appropriate for salespeople targeting certain industries that are often clustered together. Car dealerships are a classic example, but have you ever noticed how your favorite restaurant is usually located near several other restaurants in an “entertainment district”? In other words, there are plenty of other businesses on that same block that may need your professional assistance! Strip malls are another great place

to prospect, especially for business-to-business sales.³ So the next time you are dragged out shopping, take a few extra business cards with you – by now you should realize that you must always have a stack on hand – and hand them out wherever you go.

At this point, I'm already assuming that you've taken the "left-right rule" to heart, and

"Opportunities multiply as they are seized."
— Sun Tzu

notice all the businesses to the left and right of the one you are calling on (and to the left and right of the streets leading up to it). You've already staked out your territory, so now you need to find some new grounds to conquer.

Why not try leaving for your meeting 15 minutes earlier and take a new route to get there. It could even be just five blocks over, down that street you try to avoid because of all the traffic lights. Remember, traffic lights mean traffic, so there's probably plenty of traffic there too. What kind of businesses are down that street? Do you have the perfect solutions for them? If you think about it, there are plenty of ways to get to where you're going, and in sales, all roads do, indeed, lead to prospects!

Finally, two words about national leads groups: "Hate 'em!" They're a waste of money, and you can find leads on your own with much better results. On the other hand, I do love getting together with top B2B sales reps, each of them product exclusive (and obviously not competing with me!). For example, I am in media advertising, but once a month I get together for breakfast with the best and brightest salespeople in commercial real estate, auto leasing, office supplies, computer networking, as well as the infamous copier sales person. Over coffee and French toast we all share leads. In fact, our group is in such demand that if someone doesn't consistently bring the same

³ But not the great indoor shopping malls that dot the American landscape. Shops in strip malls are usually run by the owners themselves, whereas stores in large shopping malls generally belong to local or nationwide chains. Apart from some basic hiring and firing, on-site managers usually have very little say in the decision-making process for their businesses. In sales you must speak to the real decision-makers.

number of leads that the rest of us are bringing, there are dozens of competitors out there eager to replace him (and in fact, fresh blood does invigorate the group). So put together your own B2B leads group with a diverse assortment of product-exclusive salespeople like yourself. Not only will you get new leads from them; you may also get plenty of new ideas. No less important: a little camaraderie with like-minded salespeople in the morning is bound to boost the rest of your day!

And don't ignore your competition either. When I work with local newspapers, I insist that their salespeople check the local media religiously to see who's advertising with them, because that's the most obvious sign that a company has advertising needs. When training new reps one of my basic tenets is that they must always listen to different radio stations when driving to a sales meeting to find out which potential new prospects are advertising on those stations. See which local businesses are advertising on CNN and other major television networks. Who has ads on the local news station or in the movie theater right before the feature? What ads do you see on billboards and buses, or when you turn on your computer to visit local websites? Just make sure you have your pad and pen handy to jot down all their names.

According to David Shenk, the average American was exposed to 560 advertising messages a day in 1971, but this number increased to over 3,000 in 1997, i.e., ten years ago, before the boom in internet advertising,⁴ and is already at 5,000 today.⁵ This means that each and every one of us is exposed to over 1.8 million ads a year. If prospecting is all about searching for gold, it doesn't matter whether you're selling media advertising like me, or paper clips or office furniture. You just struck a goldmine that's been staring you right in the face!

In a nutshell, what I'm trying to say is this: Prospecting opportunities are out there, even in those places you most dread going to – so take some business cards along, and start doing the prospecting circuit.

4 See David Shenk., *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*. Harper Edge, 1997.

5 Belden Associates, 2008.

Just remember what Sun Tzu said: “A thousand battles are a thousand victories,” and in B2B survival sales, we’re all about victories!

Business Cards

Sales can never be a nine-to-five job. We’re always meeting people,

“Don’t agonize, organize!”

— Florynce R. Kennedy

and we’re always making contacts, whether it’s on the job, at church, or at a PTA meeting. Based on everything I said above, by the end of each day, you should end up with dozens of new contacts, each represented by a handy-dandy business card. Pretty soon, your wallet will be bulging, with the overflow vying for space in your pockets! It’s almost impossible to keep track of them all!

That’s why, when I get home or back to my hotel after a long day of meetings, like most of you I empty my pockets. In my case I usually find three separate “stashes” of business cards. I learned years ago to “load” my own cards in one of my pockets, where they are easily accessible (in my case, my right-hand jacket pocket). Then I put the ones that I receive over the course of the day in one of two other pockets. The cards that I can honestly say will require little or no action on my part, except maybe inclusion in my contact list, will usually end up in my left-hand jacket pocket. However, the most promising ones that I have been given (or the ones that I specifically asked for) can always be found in the breast pocket of my shirt (close to my heart). This is also where I keep the little slips of paper where I jot down new leads and personal information about people without business cards. What I have is a stash of information containing all the crucial contacts that require some near-term action: a follow-up e-mail or phone call, delivery on a promise to provide some information, or possibly research I need to do in order to learn more about these prospect and eventually to “pitch” them some business.

How do I remember who’s who? Having the usual post-fifty

memory lapses, I found a creative way around that challenge. Instead of just collecting the business cards, I take a minute to look at them, and sometimes I will even comment on them to the prospect: “I like the design! Who made it for you?” And always, always, I’ll jot down a little note to tell me something about the person who gave it to me. It could be as simple as “Top decision-maker. Call Wednesday. Send a proposal.” The absolutely essential cards in the pack – the Babe Ruths of baseball cards in the business world – are the ones that I mark the most simply, with two exclamation points: !! They’re also the easiest for me to find the next morning, because I keep them on my night stand or stuck into my keyboard, to make sure that they are my first priority. As for the other cards, I’ll remember who they are just by looking at the note.

There is another advantage to this too. People notice when I comment on the card or scribble a little note. To them I’m not just one more person who happens to have their business card. I’m the guy that took an interest!

Turning the Corner

With your list of prospects ready, it’s time for you to attack. But before you do that, let’s be perfectly clear! No prospect, no matter what business they’re in, has the time to give you an unscheduled 30 or 40 minutes so that you can learn about their needs. In fact, it’s actually insulting to them to even assume that they could give you that time, because what you’re really suggesting is that they have all the free time in the world. And it’s insulting to you too, because the prospect will wonder what kind of professional you are if you have all that free time for unscheduled appointments.

That’s why your initial cold-call prospecting, whether on the phone or in person, should take no more than 4 or 5 minutes, during which you appear as busy as possible. Your mission is simple: you want to come away with the following information:

- Who is the decision-maker?
- Who influences the decisions?
- How do these decision-makers prefer to be contacted?

Finally, and most important of all: you're there to get a firm appointment set up so that you can sit down with the prospect face-to-face or have a lengthier phone conversation to ascertain his goals and needs. So, in short, if you're prospecting on the phone, make sure to sound very, very busy. If you're prospecting face-to-face, make it seem as if you only have a few seconds. I'll talk more about that later.

The Elevator Statement

Now that you know how to find the prospects, you have to know what to say to them.

“Brevity is a great charm of eloquence.”
— Cicero

Remember that these people are busy, or at least they like to tell you they are, so they probably have very little time to listen to you. That is why you must make sure you have your elevator statement down pat.

For those of you not in the know, an elevator statement is a brief, carefully worded statement about your business. It tells your prospect exactly what you do, with all the benefits and none of the pain. It's called an elevator statement because you should be able to recite the whole thing in the time it takes you to ride an elevator for a total of ten floors. In other words, you have to cram all that information into just 30 seconds!

Now, I am not a believer in scripts. As a former radio deejay and television talent, it should be apparent that I love to ad lib. But even I have written scripted elevator statements describing all the benefits of my business. I call them my “Wow! statements,” because at the end of them, I expect my listeners to respond with a “Wow!” even if it's something they don't usually think about. To test a new elevator

statement, I like to try it out at cocktails parties to see what kind of response it elicits. While I include the obvious in my statement (“As you may know ...”), I’ll cap it off with something new and exciting that few people know about my business: “What you may not know is ...” And always craft it the exact same way: Benefit, benefit, benefit ... *and no pain!*

For example, “My name is Mike Blinder. As you may know I founded and manage the Blinder Group, an innovative sales training and consulting firm. What you may not know is that this year we helped generated over \$45 million of guaranteed new revenue for our clients from new advertiser categories, achieving over 55 percent closing ratios, and we did that *very* cost-effectively for our clients!”

Of course, the best way to get that “Wow!” is to actually believe in what you’re saying. The internet is full of helpful sites to help you craft an elevator statement, but the best elevator statements do *not* follow some formula or other about vocabulary, structure, or the number of words. The best statements are the most sincere statements, and the most sincere statements are the ones you believe in with all your heart and all your soul. So craft your elevator statement assiduously. Rehearse it regularly, in front of the mirror or in front of your friends. But remember, it’s also called a “Wow! statement.” I like to think that this is not only because it wows the pants off your prospects, but also because, if you listen to it closely, it will wow the pants off of you! If it doesn’t, you may as well quit your job!

Huh? That’s right, because the people I’ve met who have the most problems crafting elevator statements are the ones who have lost faith in the product their selling (I’m working on the optimistic assumption that the ones who never believed in it in the first place aren’t actually trying to sell it). Just remember one simple thing: we’re not all Sally Field or Dustin Hoffman. We don’t have countless Oscar nominations for our prolific acting careers. In other words, our customers will know right away whether we truly believe in our product ... or not. So if

you've really lost faith in your product, then learn more about it or find yourself a mentor. And if it still doesn't work for you, then fix it!

But if, after all that sincere effort, after all that soul-searching, you still can't bring yourself to believe that what you are selling will really benefit the prospect you're pitching it to, then maybe it's time to start finding another job. In short, you're not that good of an actor.

Toys to Play With

As the father of a young child, I have learned what every parent knows: kids love new toys ... for exactly

“The people are a very fickle baby that must have new toys every day.”

— Emma Goldman

ten seconds. Then they discover the magic of the box it came in! Adults love new toys too, and business people are no exception. So when you're out there prospecting, make sure you mention your shiniest new toy – the one you're bringing them for the very first time – directly after your Wow! statement. “I know how busy you are, but the reason for this interruption is that this week we launched an exciting program that I believe could very well be a great match for a business like yours!”

Get right into the razzle and the dazzle of your shiny new toy, as soon as you finish your elevator statement: “This is who I am (*elevator*), and this is something hot off the presses that I think might be of benefit to you!” (*shiny toy*). In fact, I believe that this is so essential that if by chance you don't have a shiny toy to dangle in front of your prospect's face, make one up! Find a product that your customer doesn't know about, but that you think could be a perfect fit and dangle it, swing it, clang it, and bang it, just as if you were dangling an old set of keys in front of a mesmerized baby. It's quite possible that your customer will act just like that baby and try to grab the keys. It's a natural reflex. We're programmed that way. But don't leave all your cookies on the counter. The purpose of the shiny toy is to spark their

interest and get them to give you permission to pursue.

In fact, I'm convinced that it's all these shiny toys, some of them without any immediate value, that quickly become the market staple. I remember when cars had roll-up windows, with a manual crank that you had to turn just to get the window down. Were automatic windows really a necessity for a nation that exercised way too much, since they helped them save those precious calories by not having to crank? Or were they just a shiny new toy that car salespeople could add to their growing list of features: "Now with all-new power windows!" I can actually hear those old commercials in my head, and wonder if anyone would even consider buying a car with a window crank today.

Sun Tzu realized that shiny new toys are critical to success in warfare, but what he wrote is just as relevant to success in sales: "Hold out baits to entice your enemy!" Shiny toys are your baits, because shiny toys really do sell! That is why, when you meet with your prospect, make sure you have your shiniest toys right up front where they can dazzle him as soon as you're done with your elevator statement.

There is another advantage to shiny toys too. They offer a ready-made explanation as to why you decided to call on this prospect, ostensibly from out of the blue. No one wants to be disturbed, least of all busy businesspeople. With a shiny new toy you have an excuse, not only to interrupt, but to interrupt now.

Who's the Boss?

Assuming that you're feeling comfortable with finding new prospects and breaking the ice, there's only

"Sell to the organ-grinder, not to the monkey."

— Alan Cymberg

one thing left to figure out: who do you actually speak to? Basically, there's one rule of thumb: "Sell to the organ grinder, not to the monkey!" Always make sure that the person you're talking to is the decision-maker, rather than just some random underling who likes to

play the chief. In fact, your goal should be to discover, not only who the decision-makers are, but who influences the decision-makers too.

A few years ago, while I was traveling, someone called my office, insisting on speaking only to me. With a major conference just a few days away, he had to get the final advertisements into the program, and he wanted me to buy one. When Robin, who answered the office phone, asked if she could possibly help or even take a message for me, Jack on the other end was downright rude to her: “No, I’ll only speak to Mike. I want you to tell me how I can contact him now!” Despite Robin’s requests for more information, Jack kept insisting, “I’ll only speak to Mike,” and eventually left a telephone number for me to call him back.

What poor Jack didn’t realize then was that Robin is not only someone who happened to pick up the phone that day. She is also my business partner, and the person at the Blinder Group who writes all the checks. Worst of all, he didn’t realize that Robin is not only my business partner/check-writer: she is also my wife!

So, a few hours later, when I got the email from Robin with Jack’s message, she added one important note: “Don’t you dare buy anything from that bozo! And if you do, don’t expect me to write the check!” Now, I may have been planning to buy an ad, but given the circumstances, what choice did I have?

That’s why I always warn people that before they even set foot in a business, they must try to find out who the decision-makers are. Actually, they should also find out who the people who influence decisions are. The best way to do this is simply to ask. Call the businesses that you’re prospecting and ask whoever answers who makes the decisions. At one time I had the receptionist at my radio station do it between reading tabloids and filing her nails. During her abundant downtime, I had her call each of the potential prospects I had generated for the week. She told them that she was updating our files and needed to know who the decision-makers were. That way, the next time I called, I could always

get past the “gate keeper” by asking to speak to the decision-maker directly. And trust me, you will get a lot farther by asking to speak to Bill Smith directly than by asking to speak to some random person in charge of making advertising decisions.

Today, some companies I work with use telemarketers to do this: not to sell, but to collect information. With a list of potential prospects in front of them, these telemarketers will call up and give each business a grade, based on the information they managed to glean:

- **C:** They know who the decision-maker is.
- **B:** They actually spoke to the decision-maker.
- **A:** The decision-maker is “hot to trot” and the telemarketer already set up a meeting for me!

Is it worth the extra money? Sure, because each of these calls saves valuable time for the sales reps.

And when you do get around to setting up that meeting, ask that all the relevant decision-makers are at that meeting too. I learned this in my first year of sales, when I prospected the president of a bank about 50 miles away. Of course, my mentor had trained me to ask that all the decision-makers be present, but I was intimidated by the audacity of the request. When I finally had the bank president on the phone and got him to agree to a meeting two weeks later to discuss his advertising and marketing needs, I was tempted to stop there. But then I remembered my mentor instructions, and worked up the courage to say the following, just as I had been trained to do. “I know your time is important and so is mine. Since we will be discussing advertising and marketing do you think it would be possible to have the people who assist you in making these decisions attend this meeting too?” There was a long pause, and I began to contemplate how badly I had insulted him. In fact, I began to wonder whether he had hung up on me.

Finally, he broke the silence. “Mike,” he said, is that your name?

Mike?”

“Yes,” I mumbled, dreading what was next.

“If I could get my sales department to ask that question, I bet I would double my billing!”

In the end, I got the account, but even more importantly, I learned a great lesson in how to prospect customers.

The Art of Stealth

The problem is that sometimes it seems downright impossible to get past that ever-vigilant gatekeeper and

“TAKE: v.t., to acquire, frequently by force but preferably by stealth.

— Ambrose Bierce

Speak to the real decision-maker. But as they say, “Desperate times call for desperate measures,” and “desperate measures” means stealth. Over the years I’ve learned a few tricks to circumvent the people circumventing me. Each of them has worked at one time or another, and they are sure to be helpful in a pinch.

The first thing to realize is that gate-keeping is usually a nine-to-five job. The receptionist who sits in front of the boss’s desk doesn’t usually get paid by the hour or the earning. It is a steady job with a steady salary, and most importantly, steady hours. The decision-maker, on the other hand, usually thinks business around the clock. Since most of their workday is filled with mundane chores and constant interruptions, they’ll often be the first to arrive in the morning and/or the last to leave at night. So call then: either early in the morning or late in the evening, after the gatekeepers have left for the day.

I remember how all my efforts to speak to the VP for Marketing at the *Detroit Free Press* were thwarted by his erstwhile receptionist. Since there was no way to get through her, I decided to go around her instead. One morning I took a chance and called the office at 7:05 am. Sure enough, the VP answered the phone himself: after all, he was the only person in the office at that ungodly hour.

Similarly, toward the end of the lunch hour is another excellent time to call. The gatekeeper has usually gone out to eat, leaving the target to fend for himself.

When I first began doing sales, I was left with the dregs from the proverbial barrel of prospects. One of the people I was expected to contact was a man who absolutely refused to speak with me, never mind to meet with me. With all my appeals for a lunch meeting beaten down, I decided to try the next best thing. During my prospecting I had befriended his secretary, and one day she leaked some invaluable information: her boss had brought a bag lunch to work! It was the kind of tip I had long been waiting for! At about the lunch hour I had a pizza delivered to him in his office with a note: “If you won’t have lunch *with* me, at least have lunch *on* me! When can we speak?”

Like many good stories, this one has two endings: Later that day I had the empty pizza box delivered to my office via messenger. Inside it was a note that read, “Never.” Don’t feel bad though, because I said there was a second ending: three months later I got his business, and it was a top account. Persistence pays off.

There are other things you can do as well. If the number on a business card takes you to a combative receptionist, simply switch the last two digits of the phone number and redial. In a large office with an internal phone system, this will usually take you to another employee. Ask that employee to connect you directly. While he may not have the direct number memorized, employees usually have a list of staff phone numbers readily available. Also, with many phone systems the digital display on the decision-maker’s phone will appear as an internal call, which is far more likely to be accepted.

The point is that there are plenty of ways to get around those gatekeepers, who are, after all, only doing their job. Sure, they may be intimidating at times, but that’s actually the best part of the challenge. Which leaves us with only one thing left to overcome ...

Fear Itself!

So many salespeople are afraid of making that first call. I know I am, and all too often I'll find every

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."
— Franklin Delano Roosevelt

excuse in the book not to do it. "Here I go! I'm about to make that call ... but first I'd better straighten up my desk ... Okay, now I'm ready. I'll just get myself a cup of coffee and I'll do it ... Wait! What if my wife calls in the middle? Maybe I should call her first to tell her that I'll be busy for the next half hour ... There, I've got all my notes out ... Hmmm, is that a typo? I'd better check it ... Whoa! Will you look at that! I have a meeting in ten minutes. Where has the day gone? I can't possibly call now! I guess it will have to wait until tomorrow." Sound familiar?

It should, because just about everyone one of us does it. We're all afraid to take that first step, whether we're talking about a phone call or a face-to-face meeting – and everything I say here holds true for both. I know that I hate making that first call. When I used to drive to new prospecting calls, I could have sworn my car had a mind of its own, because it sometimes refused to make the turn into the prospect's parking lot. The reason for this was quite simple: rejection. No one wants to be rejected! It doesn't matter if it's the pimply kid in high school who's too afraid to ask a date to the prom, or the seasoned sales professional who's afraid of being turned down by the prospect. We all hate to be told, "No!" I admit it. It's my greatest fear too, and the one I work the hardest to overcome.

I'm not the only one who hates it either. Larry Pinci and Phil Glosserman wrote an entire book, *Sell the Feeling*, on how to handle the fear of rejection in sales.⁶ One of their key points is that this fear actually comes from salespeople focusing on themselves and their own inadequacies, rather than on the clients and their needs. Everyone,

⁶ Larry Pinci and Phil Glosserman. *Sell the Feeling: The 6-Step System that Drives People to Do Business with You*. Morgan James Publishing, 2008.

especially today, is spoon-fed an idealized image of the world by mass media, like television. As a kid, how often did I wish that my family could be more like the Beaver's, with my mom, just like June Cleaver herself, vacuuming the living room with a freshly starched apron around her pencil-thin waist, and a string of pearls around her neck. Intellectually, we know that this is a fiction, and that Barbara Billingsley made plenty of money to play that role, but emotionally we are still trapped believing that we should be more like the Cleavers, the Bradys, or the Huckstables. We've developed an inferiority complex because of some fictionalized ideal.

Fear might not be internal just to you either. You may be the new kid on the block, completely devoted to your product, but some of the veterans may be more jaded, and actually poison you against it. Too many salespeople just starting out will break all sales records, only to be told by the "inside scoop" by some of their "more experienced" colleagues: the rates are too high, the competition is stiff, no one is buying, and the market is crumbling. These are just some of the signs of impending sales burnout, and while very little has been written about this dangerous phenomenon, it is very real and it is very contagious! Regardless of whether this fear of rejection stems from your own insecurities or the cynicism implanted in you by your peers, remember what Eleanor Roosevelt said: "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." We have to conquer fear of rejection, in sales and in life itself, and to quote one of America's greatest businessmen, "If you want to conquer fear, do not sit at home and think about it. Go out and get busy!"⁷

No!

By now you've been speaking with the prospect for just under a minute. Your Wow! statement and shiny toy statement together can be measured in seconds, and ideally, you've emphasized this by your

7 Dale Carnegie.

actions. When making a cold call face-to-face, always keep your coat on and check your watch to signal that you don't have lots of time. If you're on the phone, act hurriedly and say that you only have a few seconds (not minutes) to spare.

Still, those few seconds are more than enough time for your prospect, especially a cold-call prospect, to realize that you are a salesperson and that they are "under threat" of possibly buying something. I like to say that I've never been hit, but I have seen prospects show a queasy feeling as that magical, two-letter word forms in their gut, and creeps its way up their spine to their mouths. By just opening their mouths and intoning *No!* they believe they can wish their worries away.

So let them. One old sales technique is to get the prospect to actually say that magic word, just to get it out of the way. According to some of the best old sales trainers, the Wow! statement and shiny toy statement should be followed immediately by a specific question to which the answer is truly *no*. For example, "After hearing this, do you see any reason why I can't ask you three or four very brief questions?"

Nine times out of ten, the prospect will respond with a resounding "No!" and the word is simply out of the way. While he may have tried to hinder your progress, he's suddenly given you permission to pursue. So remember, never be threatened by the word *no*. Embrace it, and turn it to your advantage. To do this you must first remember that when a prospect tells you *no*, he is not actually rejecting you, but his own ability to solve a problem and move forward.

The Survey

Now that the prospect is willing to continue, take your few remaining minutes to find out some very important information that will help you proceed. Ask who actually makes the decisions, who influences them, how to contact that person. Most importantly, get the ascertainment call set up and in your calendar by asking when they think they might have time to discuss the matter at greater length. Your

goal is simple: you want them to grant you thirty or forty minutes, in which you can learn about their goals, needs and desires.

My line of choice has always been, “I have this new product that I think could be a good match. There’s no way I could learn everything I need from you in just 45 minutes, but I could spend some time asking you some key questions to see if the product is really appropriate.” They may hum and haw, but don’t give them too many choices. Rather than asking if they’d like to meet, continue immediately with two meeting options: “Do you see any reason we can’t meet on Thursday at 3:00, or possibly next Tuesday at 10:00?”⁸

With your calendar looking pretty booked up, the prospect is already thinking that you’re the most popular salesperson around, so he is much more likely to fit you in. And if he isn’t available at the times you suggest, show your magnanimity by rifling through your calendar and finding another slot, whether your calendar is full or not. “Let’s see. I could end this meeting ten minutes early, and give you 40 minutes on Friday. Is that better for you?” By now you’re not only a desired commodity. You are kind enough to share your time with him, and he’ll appreciate you for that.

Next!

You may have the perfect Wow! statement. Your shiny toy may have awed your prospect. You may have knocked *No!* right out of the way and obtained permission to pursue. Even with your survey done, your prospect could still say, “Get out of my store! I have no interest in working with you! Go away! You’re bothering me!”

“I think all great innovations are built on rejections.”

—Louis Ferdinand Celine

That’s right. We all get rejected, including all the best salesmen I know. It may be that you really have nothing that the client needs right

⁸ This is a classic example of the Alternative Choice close, which will be covered in “Chapter 8: Openings: The Chapter You Won’t Need.”

now, or they may want to wait a while before they tackle some particular problem. It may even be something stupid, like they don't like your tie. Regardless of what the reason is, if you feel in your gut that this prospect won't turn into a customer in the very near future, you're most likely right. So, don't be afraid to say "Thank you very much! I plan to keep working on winning your business and confidence, but I right now I don't think I have anything for you." Don't be afraid to say "Next!"

And don't take it as a loss either. When I get rejected, I like to think of the legendary Vince Lombardi, coach of the Green Bay Packers, who boasted how his team "never lost a game. They just ran out of time." Isn't time a precious commodity? That's why I'm never afraid to say "Next!" There are too many other prospects out there, and remember, prospecting is a numbers game!

To Add It All Up

Sales is just a big numbers game, so the way to win is to get those numbers up! In the next few chapters we'll look at ways to improve your ratios: if right now only ten out of twenty people are giving you the right time of day, we will look at ways to raise that ten to thirteen. If only five of those thirteen actually set up an appointment, we'll work on ways to get that five up to seven. If only three of those seven are worthy of hearing your pitch, our goal is to get that number to five. And of course, our goal is to close with at least three out of five, instead of a measly one.

But prospecting is another important way to get your numbers up. Think of it as a feeding machine, always supplying fresh meat to your ravenous appetite for closes. I mentioned earlier that at the Blinder Group I advise our clients that their sales reps target no less than twenty potential new prospects a week.

By now you should also realize that prospecting consists of four distinct steps, which follow one after the other in quick succession. Remember that whenever you're prospecting, you want to appear as

busy as possible when you actually approach.

- Start the prospecting process with your **elevator statement**, delivered in a busy posture. Don't be afraid to look at your watch, and then jump right in to a concise but powerful statement about who you are and how the service you provide can help them grow their business with very little pain: "Benefit, benefit, benefit ... and no pain!" This should take no more than 30 seconds!
- Follow that up immediately with your **shiny new toy statement**, explaining that the reason for interrupting them during their busy day is that you have a brand new product or service which you thought would be a good match for their type of business. And if you don't have one, then make one up! All of this should take no more than 15 seconds.
- Get your prospect's **permission to pursue**. By now he knows that you're a salesperson, so get his permission to continue with the survey process. You can get this done in less than 10 seconds, meaning that the entire prospecting process is still well under a minute!
- Conduct a quick **survey** to make sure that this person really is the decision-maker you're looking for and to learn the names of all the other people who will influence the decision. There are plenty of people out there who can say no, but it is rare indeed to find someone who can say yes. Make sure you're meeting with the person or group of people who can say yes.

Prospecting is hard work – I believe that, emotionally, it is the hardest work that most salespeople do. There's nothing easy about facing rejection, and as much as we like to think we're Teflon, being told "No!" always hurts.

Now get out there and start prospecting!