

## **How 2 succeed at cold calling**

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### **Introduction**

Cold calling means phoning prospective customers who are not expecting to speak to you. It is something most people either love or hate. Yet, like anything, with perseverance and practice you can become good at it and reap the rewards for your business.

Steve Shellabear, Principal Consultant at dancing lion training & consultancy outlines the practical steps you can take to be successful at cold calling. Whilst techniques abound on how to cold call, such as 'smile as you dial' or simplistic closing techniques, this article encourages telephone sales people and telemarketeers to take a wider viewpoint considering the elements that underpin their success.

Focusing on the specific elements Steve has found useful in practice, the article looks at the mindset needed, writing a call guideline or script, developing your skill set, getting organised, doing research, setting targets, managing your energy and working with others.

Cold calling is a valuable element in most companies' marketing mix. As part of an outbound telemarketing campaign it can be used to follow up mailshots, set appointments, sell products and services or invite people to seminars.

Unfortunately, the term 'cold calling' carries a lot of baggage with it: implying automatic call distributors (ACDs) that hang up or are silent when you answer the phone, pushy or rude sales people who don't listen and won't take 'No' for an answer, or phoning up disinterested people and facing a barrage of rejection. However, none of these scenarios have to be the case for you. In order to be successful at cold calling I recommend you take a broad perspective, considering the following steps. I've listed them in a sequential order I find helpful, however, feel free to 'pick and mix' or think about them in a way that works for you.

## **Step one – get prepared: developing the right mindset:**

People who like figures and statistics will tell you cold calling is a numbers game. It's about making enough calls to sufficient people in order to find those that are in the market to buy your products or services. In a sense they are correct. It's a logical argument that at any time there will be some people who have a need to be satisfied and some customers who, for whatever reason, will not be interested in your offer. Some will have bought recently, others will be loyal to an existing supplier, and some may just be too busy to talk. However, anyone who's effective at cold calling will tell you cold calling is more than a science, it's also an art.

Those people who are good at it know the power of their own communication. They approach cold calling with a confidence, ease and skill that is immediately apparent to both the customer or prospect and to anyone else listening. That is not to say they will always feel like doing it beforehand but then, who likes doing anything all the time!

So, how can you prepare yourself psychologically for cold calling so you can develop your own artistry? Most of us have heard of the phrase 'the comfort zone'. It is a concept that is generally thought about when we are increasing our capabilities and feeling unsure of ourselves. Your comfort zone includes beliefs about yourself and other people, your values, skills and capabilities. To increase your 'comfort zone' to cold call you have to perceive yourself to be 'bigger' than it or your likely resistance to it. How can you do this? It's different strokes for different folks. For some people, it will be helpful to get thoroughly prepared beforehand, for others they may get comfortable through diving in and doing it. People who have been trained in Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) may access a resource state, or put in non NLP language, simply remember a time when they did something very well and then get started. It's up to you.

## **Step Two: Writing call guidelines/scripts**

Writing a call guideline or script is a helpful way to clarify your thinking before you contact the customer. Whether you need a script

or simply a guideline will depend upon your own experience, product and service. Whichever you use, the discipline of writing down and structuring what you want to say prepares you to make the most of the call and increases the likelihood that you will be successful in achieving your outcome. It will also be very helpful in training others or refining your approach. Consider the following points:

1. How are you going to introduce yourself? What can you say that will grab and hold the customers' attention? The old adage, 'you only have one opportunity to make a first impression' is true. It is also true that you can recover the call if you make a poor impression, but who wants to start on the wrong foot? If you are calling business to business what you say to the switchboard or PA is likely to be different to the message you give the decision-maker.
2. Some useful questions to ask yourself are: who has your company worked with before like this company? Mentioning the type of work your company has done, without breaking any client confidences can increase your company's credibility and reassure the customer. Important elements on a cold call.
3. What business issue or problem might they be facing that you can help them solve? Remember that everyone buys something to help them achieve something else. That may be fuelled by a positive 'towards' outcome, such as increasing sales/customer loyalty, or a negatively orientated 'away from' motivation, such as 'getting the boss off my back' or reducing the number of complaints the company is receiving.
4. What exactly is your offer and why should someone say yes to it? Most of us these days are inundated with offers by telephone, mail and text. If you are anything like me, I imagine you screen through them as quickly as you can, binning most of them, filing a few more for 'future reference' and actually taking up a very small number. The ones we take up tend to be because they match a perceived requirement. Therefore, as telephone sales people, for our offer to be chosen we have to provide something that is perceived as valuable by the customer.

5. We can only offer a product or service that the customer is likely to perceive as valuable if we have understood what they need, why they need it and what the consequences may be if they do not have it. Key questions can be asked that help the customer disclose this information in the course of the conversation. From this point of clarity, we can then best select the products or services to meet the customers needs. We can also understand the pressures they may be facing and how we can help to resolve them. If you are only selling one product or service undertaking some basic market research will be a preliminary step in sizing your market and gauging the best way to package and sell your product or service.
6. What questions or objections do you imagine a customer would have when they hear your pitch? Putting yourself in your customer's place and considering the situation from their perspective will help you to hone your presentation. It's natural for people to voice objections and considerations, particularly when approached 'cold'. It is critical that you don't give up when someone raises an objection. Research has indicated that the larger the purchase the more questions and possible objections a customer may have. Anticipating the likely considerations beforehand helps you to answer them when they are raised.
7. How can you make it easy for them to say yes to you? Minimising the risk, inconvenience and initial investment whether it is their time, money or other resources will help to secure a verbal commitment. This applies to any offer. Hence the popularity of 'money back guarantees' and 'no obligation initial meetings'.
8. Asking for the order/appointment can be made easier by using a conditional close beforehand. For example: using an open question such as: "From what I've said, how does that sound?" This can draw out questions and objections that you need to answer before the customer can say "yes". Asking for the order before you've answered the customer's concerns is unlikely to be successful.

9. Asking for the order needn't be a big deal. A lot of unnecessary mystique and poor sales practice surrounds asking for what you want on a cold call. Much of sales training is old hat and assumes an oppositional stance to the customer. Some sales people attempt to use closing techniques that manipulate the customer into an agreement. For example: the alternative close is very common which offers alternatives before the customer has said "yes" to your offer. E.g. "Shall I put you down for one case or two?" Fine, if the customer has said they want to, but premature and likely to cause buyers' resistance if they haven't.

Once you've made the sale or agreed the appointment you'll need to take the information you need to carry out the follow up actions. This might mean confirming addresses, purchase order numbers etc. These points should be written in to the guide to prompt you.

### **Step three: Developing your skill-set:**

On stage it's been said that a good actor can take a badly written script and make it work. Equally a poor actor can be given an excellent script and it will bomb. The difference between the two is the way the script is delivered. No script or call guide can be used verbatim after all, the customer is not working from a copy!

Effective delivery is about utilising a range of communication and interpersonal skills. These include: projecting a positive image through your vocal tones, active listening, rapport and empathy building, timing, thinking on your feet, guiding the conversation and state management. Most people have blind spots regarding how they communicate and the impact they have on others. Therefore role-play and recording cold calls can be helpful in highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. It is beyond the scope of this article to address all of the communication methods and issues related to developing these areas however on our training workshops we use specific exercises to develop these skills.

One area that is useful to discuss is how you respond to criticism and objections. We have explored writing responses to overcome them. We can also pre-empt many if we are familiar with the customer and

have an in depth knowledge of the industry, and product or service we are offering. If we don't have this knowledge we have a greater requirement to draw on our communication skills.

The key area to think about is how you feel when you are dealing with an objection. When someone is rude or criticises you or your company it is natural to feel frustrated, irritated and want to be defensive. We all know intellectually that behaving in that way won't help us but sometimes we feel our hackles rising and before we know it we've said something we regret. If we are able to control what we say we may find how we say it conveys an emotional message we are not aware of. How often have you found yourself in an argument that was not of your making? All too often we can be drawn into dramas that absorb our time and attention. In less extreme examples, we can simply find that somehow we don't click with the customer and they are 'not interested'. That all-important 'chemistry' was missing. We may be given a rational reason for their disinterest, but this may not be the only cause of their rejection, although it might be uppermost in their minds and given as the reason.

This is subtle stuff, which has a big impact. Common communication faults in cold callers are: sounding abrupt, over apologetic, hesitant, over familiar, patronising or arrogant. When we are cold calling we have to be able to set the tone of the call through our communication. This means responding rather than reacting to criticism. It also means recognising that the nature of our work involves dealing with rejection and disinterest. It means being polite, professional and communicating in a way that creates openings where before there were none. This is where we earn our money and demonstrate our abilities. Anyone can convert someone who is already interested. That is just outbound order taking. The art to cold calling is developing patience and tenacity in how you work, and building relationship, credibility, confidence and trust with the customer.

#### **Step four: Getting organised**

If cold calling is not your main occupation it can be one of those tasks you put off. So, knowing this, blocking out a set period of time

for phoning in your schedule can help you make the commitment to do it. Setting aside a regular time each day or week also helps you to make it a good habit.

Organising your workspace so that you can phone without distractions helps. Set it up so you have all the leads, directories and database information you need close to hand. Basic stationery items such as pens, staplers, paper etc should be available.

Depending upon the culture of where you work you may need to educate those around you about cold calling. You will certainly want a place where you can communicate freely without interrupting others. Sitting next to people involved in filing or letter writing may suppress your creative abilities so make sure you are satisfied with where you propose to work. If not communicate to change it.

Tidy administration is good practice. For example, keeping a log of the calls you make and preparing and using a call sheet that captures details of the call. All professional telemarketers will have standard templates which they use. They are usually not complicated to set up; they just require a little preparation beforehand.

### **Step five: do your research**

Research the prospect before you phone. If you are calling 'business to business' having a look at the company website is the least you can do. Make sure you understand what they do before you pick up the phone. Visiting their articles/press release section will also give you useful talking points to help break the ice and establish credibility. It's amazing how many telephone sales people call without knowing anything about the prospect and attempt to 'busk it'. After a blustery start it is usually apparent that they are fishing for information within the first few minutes of the call. Now there is nothing wrong with finding out as you go along if you are upfront about it. What seems strange is when the salesperson announces they have a special offer for the company and then proceed to demonstrate they know nothing about its products or services.

### **Step six: setting targets**

If you are new to cold calling, initially like with anything, you will be likely to be feeling your way and finding out what you can do. Once you've built up a database, stock of leads to contact, and are more confident in your own abilities it will be possible to predict what results a day's cold calling might bring.

There are mixed views on setting targets. Some people believe they can be a disincentive as we can get discouraged when they are not achieved. Personally I've found them helpful as they provide a focus and objective to aim for. Pulling out all the stops to achieve something and achieving it when it seemed way out of reach can be a very satisfying experience. If this area is new to you I would suggest setting realistic targets which you increase as your expertise develops. Letting people around you know when you've been successful (or not) can be a good way of motivating yourself and working through challenges.

### **Step seven: managing your energy**

Cold calling can be satisfying and exhausting, so look after yourself whilst you are doing it. Allow yourself sufficient time for breaks and refreshments without losing the natural momentum that you build up in a phoning session. If the activity is new to your company or environment you may be required to be an ambassador for it, explaining the approach and its benefits. This can also be an added element to your work so where possible expect it and allow for it.

### **Step eight: working with others**

This may take a number of forms. You may have secretarial or administrative support to help send information packs or product literature. If you've made a sale or set an appointment it's likely that some form of written communication will be required such as sending confirmation by letter or email. If you are cold calling for yourself you will need to carry out these tasks. It is important that you do so promptly. Having someone check your work for spelling, grammar and punctuation is also helpful.

If you are employed within a company and carrying out cold calling for your manager you will need to keep them informed of issues and results as well as possibly manage expectations. Agree a reporting system that meets their needs before you start. Going back for the information afterwards may be time consuming and difficult.

Be open to feedback and coaching, as it can be a useful tool to help you develop, however, bear in mind the source of the feedback. Everyone has some sort of an opinion on everything including cold calling. Discreetly check out the track record of the person giving the advice - do they know what they're talking about from direct personal experience or is it just a good idea?

### **Summary**

Cold calling can be an extremely productive, profitable and satisfying experience. Gaining mastery of it can take time, however, sticking with it you are likely to develop a determination, skill and self reliance that will stand you in good stead to promote yourself, your company or those that you choose to work for. Like other abilities you've developed it will be yours to tap into whenever you wish.

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