



Tough times call for tough measures – is telemarketing the answer? Calum Robson hits the phones to find out.

calling for business

'Global economic conditions have placed extra pressure on firms to secure new business – and quickly'

■ Telemarketing is nothing new – for decades, consumers and business alike have been on the receiving end of eager advocates of double-glazing, conservatories and print services to name a few. Yet many firms in professional services sectors have largely spurned such tactics.

Today, though, the story is somewhat different. Global economic conditions have placed extra pressure on firms to secure new business – and quickly.

Guy Harris, marketing director at lead generation agency HSM, says: "There's no reason why accountancy firms can't promote themselves using the telephone. They can't rely as much on the old boys' networks – so they're waking up to techniques that others have been using for years."

Peter Rosenwald of Chartered Development, a telemarketing company, says: "Over the last quarter, we've acquired far more new clients in accounting. Suddenly, everyone's started thinking: we've got to do something."

doubts and reservations

Some are uncomfortable about blatantly trying to win new clients from fellow practices. "We'd consider telemarketing to identify overseas-based intermediaries for our trust business," says Phil Duffin, business development manager at Alex Picot, a firm in Jersey. "We don't believe in trying to poach clients for mainstream accounting work – there's an unwritten rule on the island that people just don't do that."

Elsewhere, though, the gloves are off. "Accountants are now less sensitive about getting involved in telemarketing," says Rosenwald. "Most today are not at all squeamish about it."

However, some firms have had their fingers burned – and learned some valuable lessons. "Our first foray into telemarketing was to outsource," says Andrew Gray, a director at Kirkpatrick and Hopes, a small firm in Reading. "But the problem we had was that we weren't clear enough at the outset about who we were targeting – so we ended up having meetings with people that didn't fit our ideal client profile. So I'd say the first priority for any firm using telemarketing is to define who it is you're after, and what it is about your service offering that appeals to those people."

Alan Woods, who runs Woods Squared, a firm based in Birkenhead, Merseyside, had a different issue; "The telemarketing company we outsourced to was successful in generating interest – but mainly from people who only wanted to talk about switching their accounts and bookkeeping business. As a firm, we want clients who'd seriously consider the added-value services we offer, such as our Entrepreneur Club and consultancy programmes – but feedback from the company we used was that some clients would go cold as soon as these other services were mentioned. That was ok with us, as it meant that the appointments we attended were at least with the clients showing an interest in these services."

making telemarketing work

According to Rosenwald, getting the message spot-on for a carefully selected target audience is crucial: "The approach taken needs to resonate with the prospective client," he explains. "You need to be fairly clever and choosy about it. Sector-specific messages are good examples of effective targeting. If

you're already doing business in, say, medical practices, retailers, pharmacies or construction companies, you can design your pitch so that it's sector-based – potential clients are more likely to see the value you could add."

And Gray agrees: "If you specialise in a niche sector or service, that can make a compelling case for your potential client."

Fine-tuning the client profile by size is also a must, says Rosenwald: "Deciding that you want to tackle companies with a turnover of £1-40m won't get you anywhere – it's too wide a range to be able to tailor your message appropriately."

making that call

Who should pick up the phone to connect to potential clients?

"The best approach is to take on experienced telemarketers," says Mark Lee, who runs Tax Advice Network, which provides specialist tax advice support to SMPs. "If they've already been generating leads for professional services firms, it's much easier to educate them on the specifics of the firm than it would be to train up existing staff in telemarketing."

While it's common for firms to hire dedicated telemarketers, it rarely works unless a partner has sufficient marketing knowledge to ensure they spend their time wisely: "All too often, in-house people do as they're asked – but only by reference to a partner's misconceptions as to what's likely to be effective. And who gets blamed if results aren't produced?"

Woods is considering recruiting someone for a marketing role, which might include an element of telemarketing: "If they were part of our team, making calls only for us, they'd know the firm inside-out," he says. "That would make client conversations much easier, and we could set them internal targets."

Rosenwald warns that taking on telemarketers in-house can be doomed to failure. "They'd need to be a superstar to operate successfully in isolation," he says. "A considerable amount of training needs to be undertaken in order to know how to listen properly and ask the right questions to determine the prospect's needs."

Data must be watertight: "You need good prospect data and a phone system that can diarise, as well as a system to provide key performance indicators of call quality and conversion rates," says Harris. "But it requires

a lot of management time to stay on top of the team's performance and keep offers fresh with script updates.

"What works well is integrating email with the phone," he continues. "Telemarketing accounting services isn't a quick sell; prospects will want to look online. E-mail can help nurture them and a good website is key. If you track emails and web activity, you can really improve results."

pay as you go?

Finally, in many sales roles, the best performers are often motivated by bonuses – but be careful: "Telemarketers who are paid for each lead will generally secure loads of inappropriate leads," says Harris.

Many external agencies charge instead on an hourly basis, with a commitment to secure an agreed minimum number of leads, so that expectations are set at the start. Rosenwald agrees that paying purely on a per-lead basis has major drawbacks. "It's a dereliction of management duty to solely rely on money as an incentive," he says. "That only creates high staff turnover, and some people lowering their standards. It's much better to manage them properly – training them in questioning and listening techniques, so that they're happier in their work – and that, consequently, they're more effective when they make calls on your behalf." ■

Calum Robson is a freelance journalist.

Top telephone tips

- Ideally try to tie your telemarketing exercise into a wider marketing campaign – people are more likely to respond positively if they've seen your advert somewhere or received an e-mail communication related to the service you're promoting
- Aim to generate enough interest for the prospect to want to meet a partner – don't go for a quick-fix, hit-and-run sale
- Good-quality target data is the bedrock of telemarketing – if necessary, hire someone to update and segment your database so that you can better refine your message