

Recession? Just pick up the telephone

Could the key to business growth in these difficult times be sitting right in front of you? The telephone gives us instant access to virtually any client in the country, yet many firms are unsure about how to use it to market themselves.

Integrating marketing activities

Some marketing tools are already well utilised, such as advertising in regional press and business publications, technical editorial, a schedule of seminars and other direct marketing through leaflets and brochures. These are all positive steps in informing people about your brand.

Typically, though, there is no provision to follow up those activities with a direct approach. Telephone marketing can support and enhance the results of all your other existing marketing activities, including social and networking functions. Unlike printed matter, the phone can be used first-hand to encourage a response to a mailer, to help you understand someone's interests and needs, or to fill someone's knowledge gap about what you do. A call can be used to build rapport that will generate loyalty, even when someone doesn't yet need your services.

In our fast-paced world, where memories are short and people and their needs change quickly, a prospect's knowledge of your firm cannot be taken for granted. Nor can the good service you may have delivered them in the past. Regular contact through appropriate and intelligent telephone marketing will be vital in building relationships and maintaining your brand awareness.

Getting the calls made need not be something to worry about. It is perfectly acceptable for marketing personnel to make an introductory call on behalf of professional firms; to many prospects, it indicates an innovative and pro-active interest in their business. The caller need not get involved in technical issues. Any queries can be answered by a partner when he visits, or a call directly from the partner can be scheduled.

With a quiet, friendly and professional manner, the caller will enhance the reputation of your firm. By creating a detailed briefing sheet, your caller will understand the services they are introducing. The key is to plan a campaign so that the whole exercise is effective and managed.

Managing a campaign

It is imperative to clearly identify the objectives of the marketing project from the outset. The first consideration is to decide which service or product you want to target. Ask yourself which is the most profitable activity for you, or whether you have a department with spare capacity. You may be introducing a new service or partner, or have a current 'hot' topic you have expertise in. Or you may want to build an industry-specific client base.

Telephone marketing complements other activities, and can be timed in conjunction with mailshots, press articles, newsletters and seminars as follow up to drive your message home.

It is also vital that any campaign utilises accurate target data. Things you should know about your targets include employee numbers or turnover, net profit figures, their legal status, and the important first contact and who the appropriate decision-maker is. Also consider the company's geographical area, specific industry sectors and exclusions, and their auditor's name to help you refine the list.

Making the call

Prepare a detailed brief, collating the information a prospect should need to know about you. This should include your standard contact information, details about relevant partners and specialist areas of the business, and the unique selling points of your product or service that set you apart from the competition.

You should also formulate the key questions that you want to ask. This will provide key information for the partner attending the meeting or enhance further marketing efforts.

When the decision-maker is not available, then quietly but firmly ask when the named contact will be available and offer to call them at that time. Professional and well-timed persistence is required. Ensure that if a prospect is busy you offer to call back when they are free to chat.

Tell them the reason you have called, and suggest that a partner can visit them when it's convenient. You are then silent to gauge their initial response. If they are absolutely negative after hearing your offer, you courteously thank them for their time and end the call. If they indicate that the timing is wrong or the service offered is already well covered, offer a call on a subsequent occasion or outline any services not already mentioned.

If the prospect has other questions to ask or comments to make, continue the conversation for as long as useful information is to be gleaned. If the prospect wants to meet up, book a date and time and promise to confirm it in writing.

You'll be able to refine your brief in the early stages of a campaign according to the quality of responses received, and make it work better for you.

When the hard work has been done, you must be sure to manage the process of diary dates and availability for appointments. Letting the prospect down at this stage could end your opportunity.

Making more of new business meetings

When a meeting has been booked and confirmed with a prospective client, you may think that the hard work and preparation has been done. But arranging a first meeting is only the start.

The reward of the meeting will be a profitable long-term client. Whether you are a partner or senior fee earner, there are rules that you will need to follow in any meeting scenario to bring the client on board. It will also pay to understand basic sales techniques, and partners should consider undertaking sales training.

The value of research

Be sure to research the prospect in detail. Take a look at their website and the business sector they are in. If possible, research articles or printed matter they produce, and investigate their business successes and any existing or former relationship they have had with your firm. The effort will pay dividends in several ways.

- You will be confident that you can speak intelligently about the issues they are facing – and sound interested in them.
- You will have prepared some searching and relevant questions, and know how to provide relevant answers to their enquiries.
- You will save time for them, demonstrate that you are organised and stand apart from your competitors.
- Above all, you'll be at a higher level more quickly and your prospect will see the value you offer as an adviser.

A matter of technique

Your arrival and first impression is important. Ensure you arrive in plenty of time, and greet your prospect warmly and confidently. Prove you are capable of taking control by suggesting an agenda for the meeting. If you know the prospect only has an hour for the meeting, reiterate this and agree to wrap the meeting up within that time.

While the meeting is about you and your suitability, it is best for you to ask as many questions as you receive. Listen to their business news, understand what they are hoping to achieve and uncover the obstacles that are now in front of them. It is helpful to confirm you've understood their critical needs by summarising them.

At that point you will feel comfortable enough to suggest interesting solutions, and to show them a positive way forward.

The value of sales training

Personal relationships can develop over time, and this first meeting is a small window of opportunity that must be approached in a business-like manner.

Sales is rarely a natural ability, and there is a learning process to go through to ensure you are armed with appropriate skills. A good salesperson will have the ability to deal with objections, and to control the sales process. You will be thinking on your feet, looking to close the deal at the outset and throughout the sales process.

If you would like to discuss a telesales campaign, please call Ruth Jones ACA, Marketing Director, Chartered Developments.