

Listening is the only way to really help potential customers and win their business.



Turning Prospects into Customers

Tips for Successfully Working a Tradeshow or for Turning a "Sales Call" into Relationship Building

By Rachel S. Smith

GREAT SERVICE IS SOMETHING we all want to offer our customers. We want to impress them with what we can do, how we do it, high quality, fast shipping and more. But back up for a moment, and try to remember how you turned each prospect into a customer. Did you wow them, or did you just win the first order based on price? Was it just because their boss told them to buy from you? If your relationship does not make your customers sing your praises, they will leave you for a company that really gets to know them, their needs and their wants—one that tailors its programs to them.

Too many times, the selling relationship starts out as just that: selling. *Look what we have to sell to you! Look at this new car. Look at this house. You need this! You need to put an offer down NOW before someone else*

gets it, and so forth. You know this salesperson. He or she has never asked you what your needs are. Think about those annoying sales calls you get on the phone. Those folks just start in with their script without learning anything about you, your company or your personal requirements.

Sometimes, as sales people staffing a booth at a tradeshow, we get into a rut. We know that we typically only have five to 10 minutes to work with people before they are ready to move on to the next booth. So what do we do? We cram our newest information down their throats. *You need to see this new lock, you need to get our new brochure, and you need to hear about this great new feature!* But we forget to qualify these individuals as true potential customers of our company and products. We fail to make

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them see how our products might increase their existing product lines.

The book *42 Rules to Turn Prospects into Customers*, by Meridith Elliott Powell, focuses on the idea of *customer-centric* selling versus *me-centric* selling and how using this concept and changing how you think about selling and relationships will ultimately result in better sales and loyal customers. Me-centric selling is all about the sales person: *I have a product I want to sell to you, and you will buy it because you like me.* Customer-centric selling finds out all about the potential customer first. You ask a lot of questions, and you listen, listen, listen. You talk very little about yourself to begin with.

The selling typically doesn't happen during this first meeting. That comes afterward, when you can put together a program or a product based on what you have learned about the customer's needs.

A few of the rules from the Powell's book are presented here, with examples based on the door and hardware industry and, most specifically, how they can be applied to the DHI Conference and Exposition.

Rule 3: Target the Right Client

Not everyone can benefit from your particular product or service. In order to know if a person will be a good fit for you, your company has to define your target market. What size company do you typically sell to? What end user will most benefit from your product? The more you know about your perfect customer, the better you can define to whom you want to be selling.

This concept really helps those of us who are staffing tradeshow

booths. There are times when I realize that I have nothing to educate certain people on concerning our products because I have nothing that is of benefit to them or their end users.

We are not only qualifying people for our information; we are also piquing their interest in our company. Pertinent questions can include:

- What is your role in the company?
- What type of company do you work for?
- What are your interests in the show?
- What are you looking for?
- What types of products and services do you feel are not the best choices for your company?

I sometimes have to ask prospects to be patient while these questions are being asked. Whether it is at the booth, in the elevator or before a class begins, I don't want to make a presentation to someone without actually knowing them! I might also ask questions like: "How many years have you been in this industry?" I will certainly change what I want to tell someone if he has been in the industry less than a year versus if he has been in the industry for more than 10 years!

Of course, before you ask all these questions, *you and your company need to know and define who is the right customer for your products and services.* You need to intimately know the type of client you are trying to attract. You should know, for example:

- What size company is your ideal target?
- Who in the company, by role, is most likely to need your product or services?

■ What type of work does your ideal company do? Bid work or negotiated?

■ What is its target market—for instance, schools, hospitals, condominiums or commercial retail space?

Don't forget: Once you have identified someone as a potential customer, add value immediately. Help that person by listening and solving the right problem. Then, take action.

Rule 8: Be Prepared to Go the Distance

Are you aware of the number of contacts it takes to turn a prospect into a customer? This number has more than doubled in the past few years due to the tough economy, so you need to go the distance with the prospects, staying with them as they decide to do business with your company.

Each interaction with a potential customer is a contact. In my company, I used to count it this way. Contact 1: Request for information over the phone. Contact 2: Send them out some sales information. Contact 3: Follow up to make sure that they got the product binder, and ask if they need anything else. Contact 4: Then they might ask us to quote a job. Contact 5: We do the quote and send it off. We are then almost at the required number of contacts to turn that company into a customer.

But remember: This number has more than doubled. Fortunately, social media sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook have given us new ways to reach prospects. These can help increase your contacts if done professionally. And, of course,

there are numerous opportunities at a tradeshow for contact points outside of the tradeshow floor, such as attending educational sessions or lunch and learn events.

Where individuals working at tradeshow often fall short is something I have personally experienced. I stop at a booth for a product that I think could benefit my company or for information that we need to do our jobs better as a manufacturer. The booth representative duly scans my badge and makes sure to note what I am looking for in regard to information. After the show, I head home, and then I wait, and wait, and wait for the materials that I requested to arrive. The longest I've waited is three months for the actual product binder, but in reality, the longest wait is NEVER. I never get the promised information about 50% of the time.

I once asked a booth staffer why this happens. The response was that they send the information to a central department, which then sends it to the regional sales reps, who then send it to the local sales reps, who are so overwhelmed with potential contacts that they don't have time to follow up on all the contacts. It's hard to turn a prospect into a customer when you fail to deliver what you promise before the process even begins.

Rule 7: Learn to Serve

Why did I put Rule 7 after Rule 8? The logical order of things. What I so often observe at tradeshow is that people scan your badge, promise to send you information (which never comes), and then move on to the next person. They haven't talked with you and figured out the

best approach to sell to you based on qualifying you as a prospect. So put down that badge scanner for a minute and enjoy the tradeshow and the selling of your company's products and services. Selling is not a dirty word. Done right, it is an enjoyable business interaction.

Meridith Elliott Powell succinctly summarizes the three basics of selling:

Believe in and know the value of your product or service.

If you hire people from outside of your company to staff the booth just to have a presence and possibly draw potential customers into your booth, you are (for the most part) doing your company a disservice. How can they possibly know the value of what you have to offer? Be it magicians or chair massage people or models, do they really help? Remember, you only have a few minutes with each potential customer. Do you want them watching a magician or really learning about your company?

Learn to ask questions and really listen.

Again, how can you ask questions and really listen to your prospects if they are distracted by the booth model or the sports star signing memorabilia? And can a model ask qualifying questions of your customers?

Provide solutions that solve their problems.

The Hollow Metal Manufacturers Association (HMMA) recently produced a video that stresses how its member organizations can provide solutions to the problem of filling an opening with appropriate products. What I enjoy most about my job in hollow metal is finding ways to solve problems with

creative solutions. Make sure that when prospects leave your booth, they know that you can solve their problems, be it delivery times or specific products or whatever you have to offer. When you leave a potential client's office, does he or she know how you are going to solve the company's problem? Now it is up to you to act on your promises. Whether it is emailing a drawing or having a technical person contact the person, don't drop the ball; it is in your court.

Rule 13: Follow the Steps to Set up an Appointment

The tradeshow is over, and you have identified a handful of contacts whom you feel your company can help. Now it might be time for a face-to-face sales call or even a phone appointment.

This brings me to another problem that I see too often in the selling experience. A company representative takes the time to set up an appointment with me. I always assume that he or she has an agenda—something worthy of my time. However, I have had more than one salesperson who I do not like to see because, most of the time, they have no real reason for stopping in. But there might be things I'd like to discuss with them, and I might want a chance for my team to talk with them. Then, the topic changes to college football, leaving some of us out of the conversation and distracting everyone from business questions that need to be asked. When the salesperson gets back to his office, he doesn't remember to follow up with me on my requests.

This same thing happens at trade-shows. There is a time and a place to discuss college football (over drinks at the bar) and so forth, but in the sales booth, it is usually best to keep on track.

So what are the correct steps?

- 1. Have a reason to call.** You know that the person on the other end has a need that you can fill or that he or she can benefit from your product or services.
- 2. Prepare and plan.** Know dates that you can meet with the prospect, and know the person and the company that you are calling. Check out their website, and gather information.
- 3. Take control of the call, and set the appointment.** Get to the point, briefly describe the benefit that you can offer, and show that it will be worth his or her time to discuss it with your further.
- 4. BE ON TIME.**

If you follow these steps, your prospects will welcome your visit, they will look forward to meeting with you, and they will be more open to buying your product or service.

I had a representative from a payroll services company follow all of these steps. He learned enough about my company in advance to know that we were the right size company that he could help and that we were already buying limited services from his company. He followed the steps so well, in terms of setting the appointment and learning about our needs, that we not only became a good client, we

have also referred other companies to his company, a number of which have turned into clients for him. There are times when I think that he not only read Powell's book, but he might have co-authored it!

Powell also describes the steps in Rules 14 to 20 to understanding that a sales call is a privilege. Do your homework, define your purpose, ask great questions, and deliver a strong close. And once you deliver the close, don't forget to ask for the sale. Sometimes all a prospect needs is "When can we expect the order," or "When will you be signing the contracts?"

Conclusion


Participating at a tradeshow is more than just staffing a booth. It is an opportunity to meet your existing clients and learn more about their needs. It is also an opportunity to meet new prospects and learn what their needs are and how you can serve them. That way, when you later call on these new prospects,



Rachel S. Smith is ready to meet and greet as the show floor opens.

you will not be making a cold call, but rather an informed call with a purpose—to turn them into customers who will be so extremely grateful for your company and the way it solves their problems that they will sing your praises!

Reference: *42 Rules to Turn Prospects into Customers*, by Meridith Elliott Powell (2010), Super Star Press. Examples used from this book are with permission from the author.

Dedication: This article is dedicated to the memory of my father, Morris Karpen, founder of Karpen Steel Custom Doors & Frames. I attended my first DHI tradeshow in Boston in 1985 before I joined the company. His customers were coming up to him (we did not have a booth that year) and were shaking his hand and thanking him for getting them out of a problem or solving a need that they had. What impressed me and made me want to join the company was that they then turned to whomever was next to them, made introductions, and sang the praises of both the company and Morris individually. It was then I knew that I wanted to join his company because I could tell that what we were selling was relationships and customer service, not just products. 

About the Author: Rachel S. Smith, President of Karpen Steel Custom Doors & Frames (www.karpensteel.com), has attended every DHI tradeshow since 1985 and exhibited at more than 20 of these shows. She can be reached at rachel@karpensteel.com, or stop by Karpen Steel Custom Doors & Frames booth #452 at the DHI show in New York City.