

Selling More By Phone

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In the dynamic climate we all do business in today, many sales professionals are changing the way they sell. Gone are the numerous on-site sales calls (or customer meetings if you prefer) to: introduce a new product, conduct your needs analysis or even closing a sale. These face-to-face interactions are being replaced by more effective use of the telephone, email and internet meeting sites.

Why are so many sales professionals and sales organizations turning to the phone to drive more sales? Consider some of the obstacles they are able to break down:

- ♦ **Ineffective account coverage** – Many companies and salespeople are frustrated by their inability to give enough attention to all of the right customers. This is oftentimes small businesses that don't drive a lot of business, but the business they do bring is often very profitable. A great example of this is a large health care company who thought that they may be missing out on the small market opportunities. They hired four inside salespeople to go after this market. Three years later, they have 140 inside salespeople.
- ♦ **Sense of “missed opportunities”** – Even the best salespeople will admit that part of their success is due to good timing—contacting the customer at just the right time. Why wait for our periodic face-to-face meetings to make this happen when frequent phone and email check-ins can reach so many more people?
- ♦ **Soaring cost of sales** – A few years ago, many experts put the cost of an average sales call at \$500 per sales call. Given the soaring cost of fuel, what do you think that average cost looks like today? I spoke to one sales executive of a Fortune 500 company who told me that each of his reps was \$1,000 over their car allowance last quarter...and he has 500 salespeople!

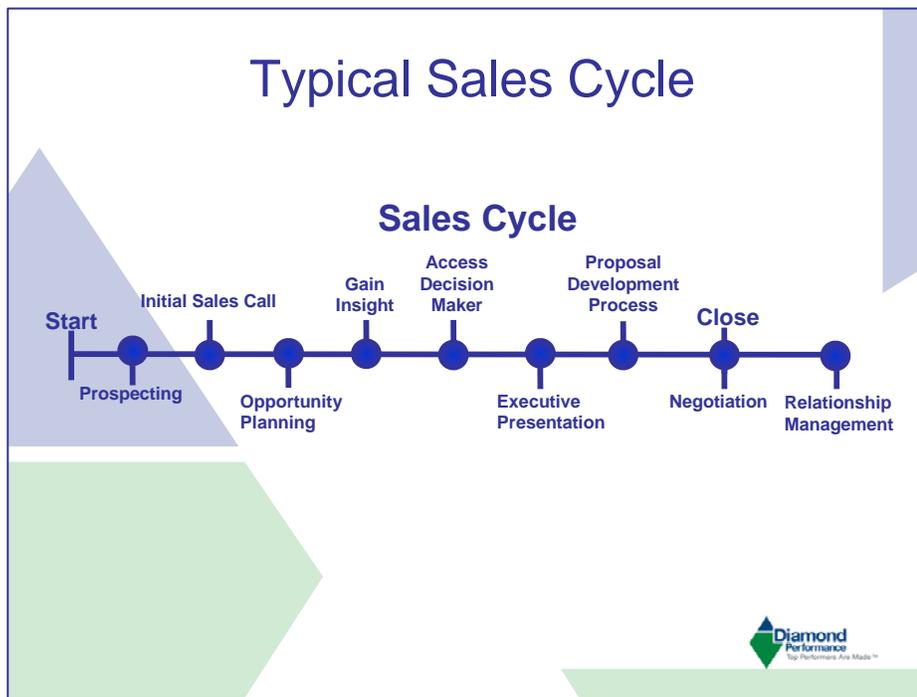
Given the summary above, the business case for using the phone more often and more effectively to drive revenue is extremely sound. So why aren't more companies and sales professionals embracing this vehicle more frequently? In our work with thousands of salespeople, here is what we've found stands in the way:

- ♦ **Demanding customers** – No doubt when a very important customer says: “Get on a plane and come see me,” we may elect to do so. But how often are we qualifying the situation to see if the customer expects a face-to-face meeting versus a conference call? After all, that conference call can happen the same day that they raise the need to meet with you.
- ♦ **Corporate culture** – Is the culture of the organization such that you are viewed as not having done your job effectively if you defer to the phone for your selling efforts? Especially since face-to-face meetings are often a key activity-based metric that companies are tracking.

- ◆ **Sales rep attitude** – It may not be the company’s attitude, but it could be the rep’s attitude that I need to be face to face with my customers all the time.
- ◆ **Lack of confidence** – For many veteran salespeople, they have developed a comfort zone with meeting in-person with customers and prospects. Having recently piloted our Selling by Phone solution with a large telecommunications sales force, it was pretty obvious to see that much of the resistance we initially faced was due to the fact that many salespeople lacked the confidence to engage the customer, ask questions, or present a solution over the phone.

Another obstacle that prevents a lot of sales professionals from utilizing the phone more frequently is a lack of training on how to do this effectively. Here are three things you can do immediately to improve your ability to “sell more by phone.”

- 1) Identify touch points in your selling process and re-evaluate your approach:



The graph above depicts a typical sales cycle with many of the customer touch points called out. How well do you understand what your selling process looks like and where the current touch points are? Once this selling process has been identified, you are now in a position to re-evaluate which aspects of the selling process lend themselves to phone interaction. One example of this is a large sales team in the SMB market (Small to Mid-Size Companies). For many salespeople in this group, Monday was prospecting day. They would work the phones with the sole purpose of getting appointments. Once the prospect agreed to meet, they would get off of the phone as quickly as possible. This practice helped them to fill up the rest of their week with sales calls, but the quality of these sales calls varied dramatically. By utilizing the approach above, they identified that by spending more time on the phone after the prospect committed to a meeting they were able to ask questions to better qualify the opportunity and better prepare them for their sales call. What they observed over time is that what was often a two-call close was still a two-call close, with one less face-to-face interaction. In some cases by better qualifying on the phone they were able to take the small opportunities and do the entire sales process over the phone.

- 2) **Leverage Selling Tools** – Everyone knows that one of the basic disadvantages to selling by phone is our inability to utilize non-verbal communication (which often makes up over 50% of what is communicated between two people). The trick is to turn a negative in to a positive. In other words, since the customer or prospect can't see us, we should be taking advantage of as many selling aids as we can. Many of the companies that we deal with will develop laminated best practice tools that can help a salesperson conduct many aspects of the sales call over the phone. The best practice tools pertain to everything from opening the call to the types of questions to ask as well as examples of how to overcome tough objections.

- 3) **Don't settle for voicemail** – Once a sales professional has committed to doing more of their selling by phone, sometimes the biggest obstacle is getting past voicemail. Over 80% of business-to-business telecommunications goes through voicemail. We also find that leaving voicemail messages may give you the sense of accomplishment but often does very little to advance the sales effort. You know you have developed call reluctance when, as the phone is ringing, you are hoping you get voicemail! Here are some solid tactics for not getting caught up in leaving voicemail messages (warning: there is nothing rocket science here, but oftentimes common sense isn't always common practice):
 - a. **Listen for other options** – Really listen to their greeting to understand what your choices are. No doubt the first choice they will give you is to leave a message, but there are usually two or three other options they will give you. You may be able to hit “zero” and speak to an operator. That operator may very well know where this individual is and when they would be back in their office. You may get a cell phone number or name and number of an administrative assistant who can help you schedule a brief phone call with the contact you are trying to reach.

 - b. **Call at strategic times** – What do we mean by strategic times? These are times in which the customer is more likely to answer. The old strategy of calling early in the day and calling late in the day still applies. Also, try calling over the lunch hour, since many people are working at their desk getting caught up over lunch. Try calling at the top or the bottom of the hour. Why? Many busy professionals have conference calls that begin at the top or the bottom of the hour and will pick up the phone for that reason. This can be tricky as their first reaction to you on the other end of the phone is irritation that you are not their 3:00pm call, so be prepared to act quickly. Apologize for the annoyance and quickly explain the purpose of your call. See if you can get them to give you a specific time to call them back later and follow up with them promptly.

 - c. If you decide that you need to leave a voicemail message, remember that that message represents you (in the case of prospecting, it is may be your sole representation) and if saved in their voicemail box, could be forever. (I say this, because I like to save the really bad voicemail messages I get from salespeople and use them as examples of what not to do!). Be sure that you have really thought out what you are going to say in your voicemail message. Avoid repeating your points and always give yourself an out so you can call them back later (“if you have a chance to get back to me this afternoon great, otherwise I will try you back again tomorrow morning.”)

Hopefully these tips will get you started in the right direction for selling more by phone. If you are interested in learning more about all of the strategies and tactics for selling more by phone, please contact Chip Kudrle, Diamond Performance Group at (952) 445-7057 or at ckudrle@diamondpg.com.