



Michael A. Brown's

Business To Business By Phone[®]

Special Edition: What They Hate \ What They Like



For almost 20 years in my consulting and training practices, I have been compiling opinions from clients and their business customers about how phone business is ... and ought to be ... conducted. That's what this **Special Edition** is all about.

THUMBS DOWN

Telemarketing. No explanation required.

Pitches and hype. They have heard 'em all. They recognize them. They reject them.

Presumptions. The self-congratulatory attitude and verbiage caused by marketers worshiping their own ads and press releases. Example: "We're the leading provider of high tech two-funnel framistats and have just been named 'best of breed' by two magazines where we ran big ads. Have you heard of us?"

Assumptions. The premature, wishful behavior and words that follow a prospect's indication of *possible* interest, such as response to a direct marketing piece or visit to a web site. Usually goes something like this: "Thank you for your inquiry ... what's your budget and timetable for purchase? Are you the final decision maker?"

Same old stuff. Uninspired, undifferentiated lines such as, "We recently sent you a mailing. Did you get it?" Or, "Did you have a chance to look at the information we sent you?"

"Just" anything. The most self-diminishing word in all of marketing is "just" ... "I'm just calling to follow-up and see how things are going." Yawn. "I just want to take a couple of minutes of your time to learn a little bit about your company." Snore.

Interrogation. A stream of closed-ended questions designed to populate data capture fields. The effect is that the calls do not sound like conversations, but rather, depositions. This is a serious epidemic in lead generation, inquiry handling, qualification, and opportunity development.

Gadgets and trickery. The most despised phone gadget is the predictive dialer (PD), a specialized computer that "predicts" when a rep will be available to talk to the prospect or customer. But when the prior call runs long, the PD dials anyway, and the prospect hears dead air. Click. The most common form of trickery is the sales call disguised as a survey. Lay off phone surveys for a while until the nefarious marketers move on to their next scam.

Making them repeat their story. This one is curious, given all our databases and CRM systems. It happens when the content and results of prior conversations are not noted, or worse, *are* recorded but then ignored on subsequent calls. Nowadays, prospects and customers insist that marketers have both human and institutional memories and use them to advance the dialogue not rehash it.

Random contact. These are the calls that appear "out of the blue," motivated by something in the would-be vendor's life ... such as a promotion or new product introduction ... rather than in the prospect or customer's business life. The absence of a relevant event ... recent past, present, or pending ... in the *recipient's* business life reduces the likelihood of the call's being accepted. Future contact attempts usually fall on resistant ears as well.

THUMBS UP

Establish the value of the conversation. Business customers are adamant that before we try to sell our products or our companies, we first have to convince them that it's worth it to talk. That's why our "reason for the call" ... right up front ... must be where we make and win the case for dialogue.

Show sensitivity to time. Because our phone calls always interrupt other thought streams in the recipient's mind and/or other real-time activities, we should always follow our "reason for the call" by asking, "Is this a good (or convenient or appropriate) time to talk?" Of course, "telemarketers" don't do



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any of this, which provides our first opportunity for favorable call differentiation.

Ask before telling, learn before selling. We need to dispel the outdated notion of making an "opening benefit statement." The reason: we do not know yet which products, services, or benefits, if any, to offer. Instead, begin by asking an open-ended question about what the prospect is doing, has just done, or intends to do that causes you to believe that there may be a matchup with what you sell. Doing so *earns* us the right to present our product or service and legitimizes our offerings.

Sell targeted v. generic benefits. Sell the pluses of your product or service based exclusively on the contact's responses to your questions. Customers tune out elevator pitches, feature-dumps, and self-aggrandizing "we're so cool" serenades. To sell your benefits most effectively, apply the "you get ... because of" approach. For example, "You can re-deploy your IT talent to more productive projects, save a ton of overtime, and still rest easy because the new software monitors and automatically fixes the network problems you described."

Suggest a definitive next step. Some calls simply dissolve at the end, trailing off into a lame, "Well OK, feel free to call me if you have any questions." To keep your calls from evaporating and to help assure forward motion, make sure your callers know when and how to issue a solid call to action. For example, "From what you have told me, it certainly seems that our product does exactly what you need. Here's what I recommend ... " Also, train your reps to secure the next step by saying, for example, "I will send you exactly what we talked about. And the only thing I'll ask in return is that we can have a conversation on Thursday so you can tell me what you and your colleagues think. Will that be OK?"

Know when to back off. Not every prospect is viable. Not every customer is ready to advance or purchase now. If they are not viable, leave them alone. If they are viable but not ready, take the straightforward,

bold, but often-overlooked step of actually *asking* them when, how often, and in what medium they want you to stay in touch.

Demonstrate courtesy, humility, and respect. The great marketers, sales people, and companies of the world are unfailingly polite and usually much more profitable than those that are not. Humility is the opposite of arrogance and presumptuousness and gets you wealthier than either. Regarding R-E-S-P-E-C-T, do what Aretha Franklin sang.

Follow-through on time and meet your commitments. If you do what you promise before the sale, your prospect or customer has more confidence that you will perform once they have committed the great act of faith by saying "yes." Plus, you continue the favorable differentiation because of the dismal record of *non*-responsiveness by many companies, probably including your competitors.

Provide for context, continuity, and consistency. Customers want our phone calls to occur within a communications context that focuses on them, not us. Our phone calls must establish and maintain a logical content flow, so that our messages build a powerful case and make our recommendations understandable and do-able. Consistency means that the messages the prospect or customer hears on the phone must match and augment what they experience in other media. For instance, sales reps must reinforce and enhance, not contradict, the expectations set by marketing in ads and on the web.

Best Advice to achieve "what they like"

- Communicate your expectations to your reps and your promises to your customers
- Assure that appropriate and workable systems and data are in place to perform the "likes"
- Hire people who actually *want* to perform the "likes"
- Train all your marketers and sales people to deliver on the "likes"
- **Bring all this to life! Call me at 800 373-3966**