

## **Fearless Prospecting in a Changing Economy**

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During the past few years, the sales profession, as well as the economy, has changed dramatically. Cutbacks, downsizing, and a need to do more with fewer resources dominate many companies. For salespeople, this means a tougher time prospecting and a longer timeframe for converting those prospects into paying customers.

As a result, many salespeople are either getting a lot more "no's" as an answer, or they're getting no answer at all from prospects. And the more "no's" a salesperson hears, the more he or she develops a fear of rejection and dreads prospecting in general. That's when prospecting procrastination sets in, and salespeople spend more time reviewing their notes, answering e-mail, and tweaking sales flyers than spending face time with potential clients.

To counter this problem, many sales books and training programs tout a "secret formula" or "key closing statement" that will make prospecting easier. Salespeople are taught how to lead prospects, how to counter an objection, and how to close the sale. The problem is that all those suggestions are focused on the salesperson and not on the one person who matters the most in the interaction—the prospect. Such salesperson-focused training and approaches may have worked in the 1990s, but they are simply ineffective today.

To be great at prospecting when economic times are tough, you need to go beyond yourself and your fears and focus on the prospect. Only then will your fear of rejection and prospecting procrastination disappear. Use the following suggestions to revitalize your prospecting efforts and put your fear of rejection in its place.

### **Shift Your Internal Dialogue**

The physical act of picking up the phone or walking into a prospect's office is not difficult for salespeople to do. What stops them in their tracks from performing these seemingly easy tasks is their internal dialogue. You know the messages . . . "Why should I bother? He's just going to tell me 'no'." "She's probably satisfied with her current provider, so why waste my time?" "The last ten people told me 'no,' so why should this prospecting call be any different?" Such internal messages are called negative projection. Realize that whenever you approach a prospecting call and believe the other person is going to blow you off or tell you "no," that's exactly the result you'll get. Prospects can pick up on what you're projecting and will respond accordingly.

So what's the solution? Positive expectations. When you have a genuine positive thought about someone and believe your interaction will work out well, then you can't fail. Even if the prospect doesn't want to take your help, that's okay; his or her reply has nothing to do with you. As long as you believe that the call will go well and you think well of the other person, you'll no longer fear the actual act of prospecting—and that's the main objective. To put it another way, when you think ill of another, you are

in the experience of thinking ill. So if you think you're going to be rejected, you're already in the experience of being rejected, which is what you'll ultimately end up with. But if you expect a positive outcome, you're creating the experience of success. So shift your internal dialogue to create the kind of experiences you want to have.

### **Make Your Everyday Selling Activities about Your Prospects**

In sales, you get paid in proportion to the amount of people you serve and to the degree in which you serve them. Therefore, the more you focus on your prospects and make the interaction about them, the higher your chances for success. Unfortunately, many salespeople get confused with exactly how to focus on their prospect. As such, they'll open conversations by saying something like, "Hey, how's it going? I'd like to tell you about a new product we're offering that will help you make more money in your business."

While on the surface such an approach seems like it's focused on the prospect, in reality prospects know it for exactly what it is—a sales pitch, which is precisely what they don't want.

So what do prospects want? To feel respected. Yes, they want salespeople to respect them and not to begin the prospecting call or visit with the salesperson's agenda. The first way to respect a prospect is to respect his or her time. Therefore, a better way to open the prospecting call or visit is to simply ask, "Would it be okay if I asked you a question?" or "Do you have just a few moments to talk with me?" or "Is this a good time for us to meet?" Respecting your prospect from the first contact sets the stage for success. Therefore, always do a respectful introduction and make the initial contact about the prospect.

### **Listen to Validate**

During the initial prospecting session, good salespeople are listening more than talking. Great salespeople take it a step further and employ what's known as "listening validation." Listening validation is when you're seeking to understand the prospect. It's empathic listening. Active listening—the technique that most salespeople employ—is simply listening to prospects and then feeding them back what they just said so they feel understood. Listening validation goes a step further and listens for the feelings behind the prospects' words—the intent and the motivation—and then replays the emotions back to the speaker.

Here's an example of how active listening and listening validation differ.

Suppose you're meeting a prospect face-to-face in his office. You've just discussed your new product and the prospect has given an overview of his company—where they've been in the last few years and their current situation and needs. As the conversation ends he says to you, "So we're really looking for three things: Price—we want to cut our costs by at least 20%; reliability—I want an account rep I know and trust; and a strong guarantee—we can't afford risk right now."

If you were employing active listening, you would then say to the prospect, "So what you're looking for, Mr. Prospect, is to cut your costs by 20%, someone you can call five days a week, and a twelve-month guarantee. Did I hear you right, sir?"

If you were a savvy salesperson and employing listening validation, your response would go a step further and you'd say, "I heard you say that price, reliability, and warranty are important, Mr. Prospect. But what I'm sensing from you—and if I'm wrong then please correct me—is that cutting costs right now and having that guarantee would be the most important to you. Based on what you've said, it seems that your company is going through your worst year ever right now. So having a low cost backed with a twelve-month guarantee would really help you feel like you're being taken care of and that you have a strategist on your side. Am I catching that right?"

See the difference? Active listening just restates actual words; listening validation gets at the feelings and emotions behind the words. Realize that everyone wants to be understood; it's a basic human need. Listening validation is one key way to let your prospect know that you understand his or her situation. And when your prospects feel understood, they'll feel good about you and will be more likely to buy. By employing listening validation, you're building trust, which is the foundation of any sale.

### **Prospecting Made Easy**

Successful prospecting in today's economy requires that salespeople make a paradigm shift in their way of thinking. This shift happens when you release your fear of rejection and satisfy your security instincts by putting your thoughts solely on the best intentions for your prospects. Only then will you be at ease when prospecting. And always remember that to be at ease when prospecting is a powerful (and profitable) place to be.

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