



Relationship Building Through Telesales

Think you know all there is to know about telemarketing? Think again. In the uniquely personal education field, it's all about selling products and services by building relationships.

Gerry Bogatz, President of MarketingWorks Inc., shares her consultative approach to telesales, one of the secrets that have made her company an industry powerhouse in the education market.

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By Gerry Bogatz

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We all have an image in our minds of "telemarketing." Whether it's the irritating calls you receive at home during dinner or the rows of pushy salespeople with headsets, you probably don't get a warm fuzzy feeling about it.

Well, think again. There is another kind of telemarketing, or "telesales," in which the goal is to sell products by building relationships. The success of educational marketing in particular is in the building of strong, long-lasting relationships with prospects and customers. Through this method, potential purchasers view sales representatives as consultants and friends, and they grow to trust and depend on them and their products. As a result, relationship-based telesales helps establish a solid, loyal customer base that will continue to grow and flourish over time.

Telesales in the Educational Market

To be successful, your telesales campaigns must be tailored to meet the very special needs of the education market. These special needs include:

- Understanding school buying cycles and how they impact school purchase decisions. The best offer will not be acted upon if there's no money to be had, so be sure to plan your telesales campaigns when you know educators are planning their purchases.
- Knowing who the decision-makers are and what messages will attract them. Understand the challenges that face educators today and offer them solutions. Knowing how to segment your target audience and tailor your message specifically to the needs of each group of educators will greatly increase your chances for success.
- Understanding the current trends in the marketplace and how they impact the success of your product or service. Analyze trends to understand what dollars are available in a particular state or district; how standards are being implemented in that state; who in the school or district is empowered to make the buy decision; and what the competition is doing to meet the needs of educators.

Effective telesales representatives must have knowledge of all of these issues to be successful. This knowledge allows them to draw educators into personalized conversations about their situations and gets them to respond positively to sales presentations.

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Establishing a Relationship

The hardest part of building a relationship with a customer is getting that relationship off the ground. Our first inclination when we pick up the phone and realize that there is a salesperson on the other end is to hang up. The key to keeping people on the phone is starting a conversation with them, building a rapport from the first moment, and keeping it going throughout the phone call and into the future.

This requires bright, enthusiastic telephone representatives who are not only knowledgeable about the product or service they are providing, but who also understand the educational environment as a whole. The first part of this statement is obvious. Clearly, sales representatives must have a high level of product knowledge in order to provide a consulting service to the educators they are calling, much as a sales representative visiting in person would. But a salesperson must also know what questions to ask educators to draw them into a conversation and make the link between their needs and the products being sold.

What characteristics must a good telesales representative have? Among the most important, we have found, are:

- Excellent oral communication skills;
- The ability to handle rejection well; and
- The ability to project their excitement and friendliness over the phone

With the right training and these personal characteristics, you will be able to depend on your educational telesales professionals to get key referrals to other educators, to respond to e-mail and Internet inquiries in a friendly and professional manner, and to be the face and smile behind your customer service. And be sure they are available throughout the school day to answer customer questions and to build your customer base through the expert consultative support they can provide. The right person for the job is the one who knows what questions to ask to draw an educator into a conversation and establish a relationship early by making that critical link between an educator's needs and the product you are selling.

Maintaining the Relationship

Once a relationship has been established, either in the form of an interested prospect or a committed customer, the goal is to maintain it and use it to generate future sales. One of the most important aspects of any relationship is continuity. A prospect who has a meaningful exchange with a salesperson one week, but receives a call from a different person the next week, is likely to feel confused and even betrayed. The sense of familiarity and developing loyalty that the prospect felt toward the initial salesperson (and, by extension, the product) is diminished. Continuity of salespeople is essential to cultivate the solid relationships with your customers that will keep them coming back again and again.

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A successful relationship also depends on good intelligence. For example, a salesperson who makes notes after a conversation about the school reforms taking place in a particular educator's district knows right where to pick up with the next phone call. The salesperson can inquire about progress with reform efforts and add value to the conversation by continuing the discussion about how the product can meet the educator's specific needs. Picture a salesperson who makes a second call to a prospect but doesn't remember what information he sent after the first call. He is clearly less equipped to ask appropriate follow-up questions. Good information and a record of relationship history allow the salesperson to create a rapport with the customer much as two people who work together on a daily basis create a working relationship.

Database Tracking

Key to the maintenance of customer relationships, of course, is the ability to keep track of information about prospects and the educational environment in their schools, districts, and states. Tracking this information in addition to the content of each contact allows reps to maintain knowledge of their customers and gives them the ability to tailor their offer to best meet each one's particular needs. For example, a customer's school size and location, the grade level and subject(s) taught, the kind of decision-making authority they have, and many other variables will all affect how a product's benefits are presented (and

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perceived). In addition, the database should be used to rank prospects by how likely they are to purchase, to track past orders, and to record how and if each responds to various marketing devices and forms of contact. All of this information can help sales representatives and managers use their resources in the most efficient way possible and maximize their chances of a sale.

While keeping track of each customer relationship is important to any telesales effort, the data should also be used in the aggregate to develop targeted marketing and telesales campaigns that build the customer base effectively and efficiently. By analyzing the information in the database, you will better understand who your customers are and what your customer profile looks like. You will also learn the districts, states and regions in which you have strong penetration, so that you can target the prospects that are most likely to turn into new customers - - starting with schools and educators that "look" like your customers. In short, data analysis will help you spend your valuable telesales dollars in the most effective way.

Growing Your Customer Base

The development of a base of satisfied customers is critical to building the positive reputation necessary for the growth of every educational product. Strong relationships with your customers require sales representatives who can meet all the needs of your customers, and these may come in the form of customer service after the sale or even as ongoing product training. Without this after-sales support, educators will look for other ways of solving their problems, and your product will end up back on the shelf, gathering

dust with all the others that never get used. You will create long-term friends who will look to you for help in their current needs as well as their future ones.

For example, let's assume Company A sells a professional development workshop, among other products. This company can establish a good relationship through an initial sale of the product. The sales person solidifies that relationship with strong follow-up to make sure the workshop was to the school's satisfaction and to find out what other needs its educators may have. Perhaps the principal isn't in need of other workshops at the moment, but she may well call the salesperson who was so helpful and knowledgeable the next time she is dealing with teacher training issue.

Whether the next call is initiated by the principal or by the sales person, the sales person can offer other products or supplementary training materials that the principal can use to support the initial workshop. The bond that was created through the sale of the first product leads to repeat sales down the line. That is why telesales can be so effective in increasing the average order size and the frequency of the orders you get from your customers.

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In addition, happy customers like to share their positive experiences with friends and colleagues. Networking is one of the most effective ways to grow market share, and it relies heavily on the relationships that you have developed with existing customers. Referrals provide salespeople and prospects with an automatic bond (the referrer) and are an excellent strategy because the likelihood of a sale is much higher than a cold call.

For example, a classroom periodical may have an unsuccessful direct mail campaign because the periodical is a new product that is relatively unknown among educators. A targeted telesales campaign can create a small but satisfied base of customers, and the program will succeed as these happy educators start telling their friends and colleagues about this great new resource. The salesperson obtains names of prospective customers from existing ones, or prospects may even call on their own. Educators who refer colleagues may be rewarded with a free gift, and the network continues to grow.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that while a strong direct mail campaign may be critical to a successful marketing effort, direct mail without telephone follow-up is likely to be far less effective than it could be. A strong mail piece (assuming it reaches and is opened by its addressee) provides an entrance into a relationship with a potential customer, but it rarely establishes that relationship. Typical direct mail response rates in the education market are below two percent, but when complimented with targeted telephone follow-up can be as high as five or even ten percent. Again, the personal contact and resulting relationship makes a difference. A friendly and informed voice on the phone can bring attention to the mail piece, confirm its message, and offer more information, essentially bringing the mailing to life.

Always, remember, the folks on the phones cannot be traditional telemarketers, who are in constant danger of insulting their audience the minute there's a deviation from a prepared script. Rather, telesales personnel in the education market must understand and speak the language of educators and address their needs. They become the "face" of your company, and their interactions with your customers and prospects have both immediate and long-term consequences for your business. The results of relationship-based telesales done in the right way are satisfied customers who are likely to continue purchasing your products year after year, and refer them to others to whom you can also sell.

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Affording Telesales

When comparing telesales with direct field sales, the number of contacts possible clearly favors telesales. A field person can make four to six calls on a good day. A telesales person can make contact with anywhere from 10-30 decision-makers a day, depending on the accessibility of the people in the schools and

the complexity of the product being sold. That's not to say that some field sales support may not be needed to help build relationships and close sales, particularly for very expensive products. But clearly, telesales can be a much more cost effective approach by itself, and can always be used to support (and reduce the extensiveness of) a direct sales team.

Gerry Bogatz is President of MarketingWorks, Inc., a firm that provides telesales and marketing services for companies that want to increase their sales in the education marketplace. Clients of MarketingWorks include Educational Testing Service, Turner Learning, U.S. News and World Report, The College Board, and the Learning Network. For more information on relationship building through telesales in the education market, call Gerry Bogatz at MarketingWorks, Inc. at 1-888-MWORKS4.

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