

BUSINESS TOOLKIT

Build a better business

By Christopher Ruvo

Cold-Calling Plan

Done right, strategic cold calling can be a powerful means of finding clients.

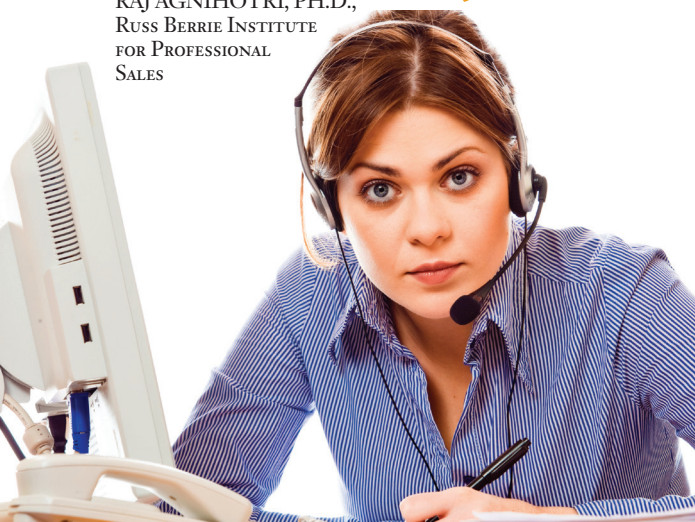
Pick up the phone. Punch in a number. Pray. If that's how you go about cold calling, it's time for a change.

Preparation, practice, a positive attitude, clear objectives and the ability to think coolly on your feet are the key ingredients to turning a cold call into a meeting. While referrals remain a powerful and targeted way to get new clients, Raj Agnihotri, Ph.D., feels that cold calling, if performed properly, is an effective method of courting clients. "I believe it is still important to developing a database of prospects and building business," says Agnihotri, an assistant professor at the Russ Berrie Institute for Professional Sales at William Patterson University in Wayne, NJ.

Jeff Mowatt agrees. The Calgary-based customer service strategist says successful cold calling begins with identifying a goal, such as wanting to arrange a meeting, be it in person or in an online forum. Instead of starting at the letter 'A' in the phone book, distributors should come up with a targeted list of clients, using criteria such as industry or revenue. From there, they should write a script to meet that objective. Before calling, the script should be memorized and practiced until they can recite it naturally. Rehearsal can include simulating dialogues in which

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the distributor practices staying on track with the core message when confronted by both positive and negative reactions. "You can practice when you're in the car alone," says Pat Cavanaugh, president and CEO of Cavanaugh Marketing Network (*asi/159262*). Conversations are fluid and you might not be able to follow the script exactly, but as Agnihotri points out, "It is the bone structure around which you form the meat of your message."

Once you make the call, it's important to get to the point quickly without sounding pushy or falsely familiar. Introduce yourself and the company you work for. Don't say, "How are you doing?"; it sounds saccharine, says Mowatt. If you're speaking with a receptionist or other gatekeeper, politely ask if he or she can put you in touch with the company's buyer of promotional products. If you're talking to the end-buyer, give a brief benefit statement – a sentence should do – in which you state how you can help the person's company. Before going further, ask the person if he or she can spare a moment to talk. "That establishes respect. It shows you understand they're busy," says Cavanaugh. If the time isn't right, ask when you can call and then follow up. If the end-buyer gives you the green light, launch into your script.

In a few sentences, you should establish how promotional products can help the prospect's company and convey how your distributorship is unique. Also, you should briefly highlight a success point or two, such as awards won or an example of a campaign your company ran to help grow a client's brand.

The call (which should take no more than three to five minutes, unless the prospect wishes to talk longer) should conclude with you trying to nail your objective. Pay attention to phrasing here. Instead of asking for a "meeting" – which can have a time-consuming, onerous sound – ask if you can "sit down" with clients and further demonstrate how your promotional plan can help them, says Mowatt.

Throughout a call, maintain an upbeat tone. Even if you don't achieve your goal, you should conclude positively, thanking the prospect for their time and expressing a desire to work with them in future. "Don't sound desperate. Don't beg," says Agnihotri. "Remember, you're not selling a product; you're selling a benefit."

COLD CALLING 101

Here are eight tips to nail down your cold-calling strategy:

1. Know your distributorship well and understand how the promotional products it provides will benefit a prospective client.

2. Identify a goal for each call, i.e., to arrange a meeting with the prospect.

3. Write a cold-call script that succinctly and powerfully highlights how your firm is uniquely positioned to help an end-buyer.

4. Memorize the script; rehearse it so that you can speak it naturally.

5. Make the call, staying positive and polite.

6. Your script is there to guide you, not confine you. Stay loose. Roll with the conversation. Just make sure you convey your key message.

7. Close in on your goal; ask about when you can meet the end-buyer.

8. Even if your pitch is rejected, conclude positively and thank the person for his or her time. You never know; there could be a deal in the future.