

THE BIG PICTURE: INFORMATIONAL SERIES

SALES AND TECHNOLOGY

Salespeople and Email: Tool or Trap?

Salespeople have been avoiding cold calls and confrontations with clients for years. However, email, voice mail, and even text messaging, are making it much easier to avoid interpersonal client contact. It has become very easy for a salesperson today to avoid cold calling and making presentations when they can send PowerPoint files instead.

While there is nothing wrong with taking advantage of technology as a sales support tool or for efficient and remote communication, sales still requires face to face contact. At ProDirect, we believe that everyone in the company sells and we are all an extension of the brand. Connecting with customers solely by e-mail or voice mail fails to complete that "last mile" of marketing.

Companies need to continue to invest in what we call "situational" presentation skills. Reps need to be conversant in their subject matter and be able to deliver it in a hallway, at a seminar, or in a conference room. To "mean more" to prospects, you need to connect with them in a kinesthetic way.

Technology: What is it good for?

Technology is great for managing the sales process. CRM tools, pipelines, Instant Messaging between reps and the sales managers are all great productivity tools. We advise companies to look at the emotional component of the communication. If it relates to a price change, a specification modification or new product enhancement - by all means use an enabling technology to communicate with clients or prospects. For areas higher on the emotional scale - asking a prospect to change suppliers, price increases, and proposal reviews - face to face needs to be the norm.

What steps can Sales Managers Take?

Senior Sales Management needs to create a culture of technology and its use. Using technology in the sales process will vary by industry - even by customer, so take the extra time to set ground rules. But in general, e-mails to clients should be used for minor communications, such as a heads-up that a proposal will arrive the following day, or to schedule an appointment. More important communications, such as proposals or negotiations, and

communications with brand new clients, are almost always more effective in person.

A good rule of thumb to follow is 75% percent of client contact should be face-to-face or through telephone conversations. One of our clients had set a rule that if the email communication to the client was more than three sentences, pick up the phone.

Sales managers who aren't sure that reps are following their guidelines regarding technology need to monitor salespeople's activities. We recommend setting rules for how many in-person meetings and telephone calls reps need to make each week and having them recap their successes at weekly sales meetings.

So what's a manager to do if he's identified a rep who's relying too much on technology? We look at it as an opportunity for coaching. If a rep is making only three sales calls in an hour, coaching can uncover other underlying issues around the lack of interpersonal connection. Often we find that the rep needs a fresh elevator pitch and or a more qualified list of prospects they think have a higher likelihood of responding favorably.