

DO YOU HAVE ENOUGH OARS IN THE WATER?

By Troy Harrison

I'll be the first to tell you that sales can be confusing these days. Customers have different expectations, different needs, and have far more access to information and ways to research us and our products. That demands a higher degree of professionalism and precision in our selling – if we make a misstatement, customers can back-check pretty easily.

Even with all that said, the most confusing part of sales these days is outreach. I'm using the broader term, "Outreach," rather than the older term "prospecting," because finding new customers today involves more and different techniques and tools than conventional prospecting. For many of these avenues, it also requires a different approach.

When we're looking at pathways to new customers, we have to recognize that all pathways are not equally effective, and not all pathways will reach the same people. Most people have preferences for how they like to communicate, and only by figuring out those preferences can we establish a dialogue with them. For instance, I have one long-term client who absolutely, positively will not return my phone calls. Period. But if I send him an email, I typically have a response within an hour. This person has spent money with me for about ten years – but I can't remember the last telephone conversation I've had with him. Email is simply his preference.

So, what works best for outreach? It just depends – but here are the most common alternatives:

Data Driven Teleprospecting: This is what we think of as the old "smiling and dialing" method. Even this has changed in recent years. The best system used to be to call the receptionist and do the "person who" call ('Hi, could you tell me the person who would buy your xxxx?'), but today the available data demands a better approach. Before you pick up the phone, you need to have a contact NAME (not position), good data on what the prospect company does, and a good approach statement ("Hi, I'd like to talk about your XXXX") is not a good approach. Be prepared to communicate value right up front, and recognize that the ratios (dial to contact, contact to appointment) are lower than they used to be because fewer people answer their own phone these days. Even with those limitations, this method is still an essential part of any outreach program.

Email Blasts: This is one of those areas where the best thing to say is, "It works, but...." If you want an outreach method where the percentages are REALLY low – as in "lower than even direct mail," you've found it. The advantages of email prospecting are that it's cheap to do a campaign – much cheaper than direct mail – as well as being easier and quicker. However, especially for initial outreach, the percentages are very low. Response rates of less than one-half percent are not uncommon. Still, that's greater than zero, and in the interest of full disclosure, I'll have to say that I have gotten new clients from an email blast.

LinkedIn: Many are the proponents of social media, and many are the 'experts' who say they can show you how to monetize social media. Few actually can. Again in the interest of full disclosure, I don't have a proven method to monetize social media, but I think I'm on the verge. If I find it, you'll read it here in the future. Social media is good for building visibility and image. I like to refer to your profile on LinkedIn as your "virtual trade show display" because prospects will go to your profile to check you out AFTER they have become aware of you in other ways. Having a good profile builds legitimacy for you.

LinkedIn is also the only social media platform that allows you to target prospects through demographic searches, as well as a search by name. This can be invaluable in an outreach effort. If you're going to use LinkedIn an outreach platform, don't make the mistake that too many people make. DO NOT invite someone to connect, and then as soon as they connect, bombard them with sales messages. Instead, focus your early messaging on contributing value (knowledge, expertise, tips, etc.) to establish yourself as a good connection and THEN make a sales message. I like to keep my sales messages (as in messages attempting to sell my services) to less than 1 out of every 10 posts that I make. More than that and you'll find people unfollowing you, or even removing their connection.

YouTube: Did you know that YouTube is the second most popular search engine these days, behind Google? It's true – particularly when people are searching terms that begin with "How to." When people want to know how to do something, YouTube is where they go, and even if they search first on Google, many times Google will lead them to YouTube videos. That means that if you're not on YouTube, you're missing a lot of opportunities. Can you teach your customers and prospects something? If so, can you make a video showing it? If so, you should be on YouTube. Now, before you run out and buy a bunch of equipment to set up a studio, let me give you a spoiler alert. Today's smartphones have cameras and microphone systems that are perfectly capable of shooting a great video. You can add a tripod on Amazon for between 20 and 50 bucks, a microphone for another 20, and you have the same quality of video that it used to take thousands of dollars to shoot. Toss in Windows Movie Maker (not supported by Microsoft anymore but still available through download sites), and you have the capabilities to create and edit great YouTube videos.

This, of course, is not an exhaustive list, but it is representative of the most common and popular outreach platforms. My challenge to you is to evaluate your current outreach program, figure out the best mix of platforms for you, and then start working them on a regular basis. Get as many oars in the water as you can.

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