

Denver Business Journal - September 17, 2007
<http://denver.bizjournals.com/denver/stories/2007/09/17/smallb4.html>

DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Friday, September 14, 2007

Prevent problems, save time in account management

Denver Business Journal - by [Garry Duncan](#)

The four major selling activities are prospecting, running a sales process (qualifying), closing and account management.

Most managers, owners and salespeople agree that account management gets the most attention and takes the most time. You can improve your account management efficiency and save time with some pre-planning and by asking focused questions.

Key components of account management are to check your records, honestly assess your current relationship, plan your calls, coach your customer on potential problems, and coach your staff on specifics of each key account.

- Start by taking inventory of your account records.

Do you have all the concise information in one place without wasting precious time looking for it? Make sure you note important dates, such as contracts, customers' birthdays, special events, special interests, community, political and business associations, and personal accomplishments of your key customers.

Do you know your customer's personal goals and aspirations? Do you know each customer's personal preference for timing of phone calls, e-mail? Who is their backup when you can't reach them?

What other jobs have they held in their company? Whom do they report to, and who reports to them? Who is their most likely internal replacement and what do you know about them? Have you asked your contact to invite others that should know you to lunch with you?

Harvey MacKay, author of "Swim with the Sharks," wrote a 66-point questionnaire for his salespeople to fill out on each customer. You can find it on his Web site at www.harveymackay.com.

- Are you clear on your current relationship with your customer?

Ask customers what their expectations are of you and your company. Don't accept vague, "You are doing just fine" answers. Gently probe and uncover specific expectations about deliveries, placing orders, handling billing issues and mistakes.

Ask how often they expect to see you without being a pest. Ask key accounts what they want you to keep doing, what you're doing that you should stop doing and what you aren't doing that you should start doing.

One seller discovered that the buyer actually felt annoyed being contacted in person every week and preferred that personal visits be interspersed with phone calls and e-mails.

- Are you making sales visits or sales calls?

Having an objective for each call retains customers, increases sales and improves your efficiency. Just stopping in to say "hi" is a waste of time and energy, and usually does little to protect business.

Prepare questions about needs for new products or additional uses of existing products. Inquire about problems and concerns. Ask about other users in the organization and become a virus, spreading your knowledge and broadening relationships within the organization. This protects you if a key contact retires or leaves the organization.

- Asking if there are any problems may stimulate a canned, non-thinking answer.

Some buyers are hesitant to complain until the number of problems prompts them to make a change -- and then it can be too late. Asking, "What will it take to lose the business?" stimulates thought and is more likely to generate discussion.

A good account is likely on the radar screen of your competitors. It's better to have these discussions before a customer makes a decision to change, than try to reverse a decision they feel the need to defend.

Continue to coach them on the differences and benefits of your product over the competitors', even when you have the business, and stay informed about new competitor initiatives and products. The old adage, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," is sage advice here.

Regardless of the quality of your product or service, mistakes and problems can occur. When a problem occurs, have you coached your account on how to handle it? Do you have a backup contact for your customer if you're not available?

It's OK to want to be the most important contact from your company in your customer's eyes, but it's not OK to be the only important contact your customer knows in your company. Knowing key people at a smaller vendor can provide security when decision-makers have to choose between a large known company and a smaller one.

Protect business by strengthening your customer's relationship with your company, not just yourself. Knowing that you have a competent behind-the-scenes team creates value.

- Finally, coach your company's receptionist and any other contacts your customer is likely to interact with on their likes, dislikes, and specific products and services they use.

One report said customers leave vendors more than 60 percent of the time because they felt slighted or unappreciated by someone in the vendor's company. Some customers silently take notice until one too many events pushes them over the edge.

Like personal relationships, business relationships grow and strengthen when you address problems early, communication is open and there's collaboration on finding solutions.

Garry Duncan is principal of Denver-based Leadership Connections, a sales training company. Reach him at 303-462-1277 or garry@leadershipconnections.com.

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