

From the Denver Business Journal:  
<http://www.bizjournals.com/denver/print-edition/2011/01/14/master-the-overlooked-skill.html>

## Sales

# Master the overlooked skill of asking for referrals

Premium content from Denver Business Journal - by Garry Duncan

Date: Friday, January 14, 2011, 4:00am MST

"I am really good when I get in front of a prospect. The problem is getting in front of them."

How many times have you heard that one or said it yourself? It's a frequent mantra of salespeople. Many don't like cold calling, which is very effective when done correctly.

An overlooked skill is that of asking for referrals. "Who do you know that I should call?" almost always will generate an, "I can't think of anyone right now, but if I do, I will let you know."

Here are four tips that will help you increase your ability to generate referrals when you do ask.

First, master the ability to describe your ideal prospect clearly and succinctly.

Second, qualify your referral source on their willingness to refer to you.

Third, remember that asking for a referral is a process, so plan your approach so you can allay fears and obstacles. Fourth, include direction on where to look in your requests.

- Start by getting clear on your ideal prospect.

Have you ever been to a networking event and when others finish their introduction, you have no idea what they do or how to help them? The creativity in elevator pitches has gone too far and become too vague. Make it easy for potential referral sources to recognize who you need to meet and how you can help them.

Master the art of coaching others how to recognize your prospects. Include all the demographics, such as titles, industry, size, geographic areas and areas of responsibility. Illustrate the types of problems you can solve and relay how others have benefited. Avoid industry jargon and acronyms because potential referrers are unlikely to know their meaning.

Use simple language. It's easier to get a referral when others can connect what you do with a problem they know someone else is experiencing. Be prepared to provide bulleted notes on problems and demographics of your ideal prospect. At least write them on the back of your card to help stimulate a more thorough mental scan.

- Avoid risking current relationships by qualifying potential referrers for their ability and willingness to refer before you ask. Assess someone's ability to refer by doing your homework.

Get to know them and their business, and build trust. Ask about previous employers, past experiences, trade groups and association events they attend. Once you're satisfied that they may know others whom you could benefit, qualify them for their willingness to connect you.

Ask, "How would you feel about helping me meet other people who should know about what I do, if I represent you well?" Listen closely for waffling and vagueness. Their willingness is just as important as their ability. If there's any hesitation, and you value the relationship, suggest you talk about it another time and don't push for a name.

- Because referrals are a sensitive arena, share your sales approach with the person you're asking to refer. Do you want others contacting your center of influence, using your name, if you don't know what kind of approach they will use?

Everyone wants to protect relationships that have taken time to develop, so explain your sales approach. For example, you might say, "I will introduce myself and my services and find out about their needs. If there is not a fit, I will be the first to say so. I want to represent you well, and I want you to look good for introducing us."

Ask your referral source the best way for you to make contact. Coach them on what to say so that the referral will be anxious to talk with you. A breakfast or lunch is a great way to remove pressure and get to know someone in a more personal way outside the office. Discussing fears, concerns and your sales approach up front will foster trust, deepen relationships and generate more referrals.

- Respect the time pressure of the current environment. Rather than risk someone saying no because of a current deadline, give them time to look more closely for you.

Ask in a nurturing way if they'd be comfortable taking a few minutes — and it doesn't have to be right now — looking through lists of their vendors or trade association memberships to see if there's anyone you should know.

The idea is to get them to look more closely than just doing a random mental scan. If they say yes, ask how much time they need and then schedule a second time with them. Start with vendors and trade lists, because initially they'll be more protective of clients.

Inspiring others to refer and calming fears are major skill sets of successful professionals. Augment your other prospecting techniques and sharpen your approach to referrals.

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