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Five things you can do to find new business in tough times

Everyday the news is filled with statements from top economists saying that the economy might possibly be in recession. Instead of asking economists the reporters should ask a salesperson. We're like the proverbial canary in the coal mine; we know what's going on in the economy long before the news reaches the economists in their ivory towers. One other difference between professional sales people and professional economists, we can't afford to watch the trends and wait for them to change. It's a salesperson's job to be an agent of change rather than just an observer. Here are five things you can do to keep moving forward in a sluggish market.

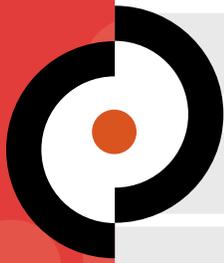
#1 Broaden your horizons

We've all heard the story of the huge elephant that could be restrained by chaining it to a small stake driven a few inches into the ground. The huge animal never tries to escape because when it was young it tried unsuccessfully to pull out the peg. Now it "knows" that it cannot get away and that it is useless to try. There is something to be said for learning from experience but one must be careful not to be limited by our personal history. When times get tight it is critical that a sales rep calls on every potential customer. In our business a prospect can be defined as anyone that wants/needs to deliver a message to the public. You should be calling on anyone who falls within this definition. Churches looking for new members, universities looking for people to participate in studies, utilities and municipalities that have to distribute public notices are all prime targets. My company recently landed several local School Districts because the postal rate increase blew out their budget for distributing newsletters to the community. Leave no stone unturned when working your territory. Give every prospect the opportunity to tell you no, don't try to save time by saying it for them.

#2 Get ruthlessly competitive

General George Patton once told his troops *"It's not your job to die for your country, it's your job to make the other @%#!~^%# die for his country!"* In a contracting economy, it is your job to make the other media rep lose revenue for his company. Take a long hard look at your competitor's advertisers. If your prospect is running a half page ad in the local daily, get your artist to spec a sharp quarter page ad for them. Show the client how they can "cover all the bases" without increasing their budget by using the smaller ad in the competitive publication and investing the savings in your publication. Use the tough times to your advantage: "Mr. Customer wouldn't you agree that in these tough times you need to reach as many people with your advertising

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as possible?” Pay attention to local cable and radio ads, call these advertisers and talk in value terms, and talk about getting the maximum return for the customer’s investment. I’ve actually done some “dumpster diving” in the trash can at the post office to retrieve direct mail pieces from local businesses. The recent postage increases make these prime prospects. The competition is going after your customers and as always your best defense is a good offense.

#3 Be a problem solver

If you can make a prospect’s life a little better they will buy from you. The first step to solving a problem is finding and defining it. This means asking good questions and being a good listener. Recently one of my reps was working with a local hardware store owner who said, “I can’t advertise because all of my cash is tied up in inventory”. After some good follow-up questions, the rep came up with a folded 11” X 17” insert with a “Clearance Sale” ad on front and a long list of items on the other three pages (example: Lawn mower—paint scratched originally \$225 now only \$198) This ad reduced the customer’s inventory and cash flow problems. The ad generated a lot of traffic because people were looking for savings in the tight economy and converted the prospect into a regular advertiser. A garden center owner told another rep “This rainy weather and the recession are ganging up on me so I can’t afford to advertise” The rep designed an ad with a “Save this for a rainy day” coupon which gave shoppers 15% off when it was raining. Rainy days are now some of the busiest days for this client. Customers look to us for ideas and solutions for their problems especially in tight times

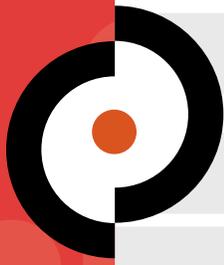
#4 Get by with a little help from your friends

When things are tight you need to use every tool you can to find new business. The great business author Harvey MacKay once said the most important word in the English language is “Rolodex”. He is a great believer in networking. Use your personal and business contacts to find new business. Ask your regular advertisers for referrals and become active in local organizations and chambers to meet new people. Whenever possible give leads to other business people, they will be anxious to return the favor. Constantly ask your acquaintances “Can you suggest anyone I could help, someone who needs more customers?”

#5 The early bird gets the worm, the night owl gets the restaurant.

Make sure you are making your calls when the buyers are available. I was working with a rep who was whining about not being able to sell any of the restaurants in his territory. When asked why, he said the “Owners are never in”, with a few additional questions I discovered what he really meant was “The restaurant owners are never in during normal business hours.”

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I scheduled an evening with the rep and we called on restaurants. We were able to talk to a number of the “elusive” owners and were able to interest several of them in advertising. As a young salesperson I called on a local bakery and caught the owner as he was leaving for the day. I asked him if he had a “few minutes to talk” and when he predictably said no, I asked what would be a good time. With a smile, he told me “4 am”. He nearly fell over when I asked if “4 am tomorrow morning was good”. He was even more amazed when he heard my keys rapping on his plate glass front door at 3:55 am” This was a good time for him because he had to wait for the days bread to rise so he was willing to listen to my presentation. My loss of sleep paid off when he bought a large program from me. He later confided that I was the only sales person who ever took him up on his offer to meet at that time and that he would now have to find a new way to avoid sales pitches. You don’t have to get up at 4 to make a sale, but make sure you are making calls when it is convenient for the client, not when it is convenient for you.

Bonus Technique—Be a beacon of hope

Everyone likes to complain about their aches and pains but they don’t want to hear about yours. This is also true about economic woes. Let the clients do the whining, its your job to stay positive, People are hungry for good news and will look forward to your calls if you are the bearer of glad tidings. Collect success stories from the community and scan the papers for positive articles. Customers will want to talk to the rep who gives them hope—“Ms Customer did you see the article about XYZ industries in the paper, they’re adding 15 new jobs, that’s great news for our community.” I always gave each of my customers a positive quotation each week when I was making my regular call. I printed it up on a piece of letterhead. Many of them posted it in their business and whenever they saw it gave them a positive impression of me, and my company.

Conclusion

Tough economic times require a different mindset than a boom market. The sales person who stays the course and does not adapt to the situation will lose out to the person who is constantly searching out new sources of business and trying new sales techniques. Always remember the words of Dr. Robert Schuller “*Tough times never last, but tough people do.*”

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