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### Mind Reading for Sales People

Recently, I took part in an “Ice breaker” exercise at the beginning of a meeting. The organizer of the meeting passed around a basket filled with sealed envelopes and instructed each participant to choose one. Each envelope contained a question that we were to read aloud and answer. The questions were designed to reveal something about the attendee’s personalities. I drew an easy one, “If you could have your choice of any super power, what magical ability would you pick?” Without hesitation I said, “The power to read minds!” This is what we do as sales people and managers; we try to use our “powers” to discern what others are thinking and then use that information to build relationships. This is why I love research. Good marketing and psychological research allows us to peek into the thought processes of others and to understand what motivates them. This knowledge makes persuading them to buy advertising from us exponentially easier.

I am fortunate to work for a company that provides our sales people with a variety of research tools. We have access to a number of research data bases and research websites. Most of our research savvy sales people start their account planning by going to AdMall. AdMall is a site that collects information from a wide variety of sources and packages it in a form that can be readily used to prepare for a sales call. AdMall makes any rep an “instant expert” on their customer’s business. They can go into the call armed with the information they need to intelligently discuss the customer’s business situation.

Every year AdMall publishes the “Local Advertising Sales Forecast”. This is produced by surveying media sales people, sales managers and their customers. This survey provides a snapshot of where the industry is and where media professionals feel the industry is going in the next year. I find the observations of local media buyers particularly interesting and informative. Examining what our prospects are looking for when considering a media buy and what leads them to reject a proposed program provides valuable insights into what constitutes an effective advertising sales presentation. The AdMall Local Advertising Forecast provides actionable sales intelligence that can be used to improve our closing ratios. AdMall has given me permission to share some excerpts of this copyrighted report with our Link and Learn readers. Here are some of the highlights from the newly published 2013 AdMall Local Advertising Sales Report:

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### **What media professionals are saying about the industry.**

It seems that the recession has finally bottomed out. Most media sales managers (73.2%) are confident that they will meet or exceed their 2013 sales goals. In the previous year's survey fewer than 55% of managers felt that they would achieve their objectives in 2012. Digital and electronic media managers were the most optimistic and print managers were the least positive about making their number in the coming year.

As print advertising sales people, we need to work harder than our peers in other media to prove the worth of our publications. There is a widening gap between the actual and the perceived value we deliver to our advertisers. In previous Link and Learn articles, we have reviewed the research which proves that print remains a cost effective way to engage readers and attract customers to our client's businesses. Our challenge is to communicate this to our prospects. It is important that we do not buy into the "print is dead" mythology. As the economy recovers, we need to be confident and aggressive promoters of print to secure our fair share of the expanding advertising market.

Media sales managers see their two greatest challenges as getting their teams to use all of the resources available to them and motivating their people to move out of their comfort zones. This is reflective of the changing sales environment. In his play, Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller wrote that sales people make their living by "riding on a smile and a shoeshine." This is no longer the case, with money tight and so many media options to choose from, customers need to see proof of how our products can help them. Reps who rely solely on their relationships with customers will find themselves losing accounts to better prepared competitors. If we do not embrace new technologies and new sales techniques, we will find ourselves becoming "8 track tapes in an I-pod world."

Advertising sales people see local media competition as their biggest concern (58.9%) followed closely by advertiser churn (50.6%). They feel they are trapped on an endless treadmill, constantly pursuing new accounts just to replace lost revenue. The AdMall 2013 Forecast offers the following advice, "*Both managers and reps need to work hard to develop solutions that will provide advertisers with results. Successful advertising will help keep existing accounts happy and competitors at bay.*" I couldn't agree more!

### **What Advertisers think about us.**

In addition to surveying media sales professional, the researchers who compiled the 2013 Sales Forecast talked to media buyers. They asked buyers to name the "Top five attributes that are most important to you in a media advertising sales rep?"

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Here is how they answered:

1. “Knows my company/line of business.” (67.3%)
2. “Delivers what he/she promised.” (48.8%)
3. “Knows my customers.” (45.6%)
4. “Knows his/her product.” (42.7%)
5. “Professional (in conduct and appearance).” (41.8%)

Coming in at number six and deserving of an “honorable mention” at 34.3% is “Respectful of me and my time.” I reviewed this with a number of our sales people and they were surprised to learn that “Likeable” ranked way down the list at position number twelve. Only 8% of buyers included this in their “Top Five.” What does this tell us? While building rapport with a customer is still very important, this relationship must be built on a genuine interest in growing the advertiser’s business and solving their problems.

If we could plug these “attributes” into a computer and create the perfect “ROBOREP” what would he/she/it look like? ROBOREP would scan its databases to learn as much as possible about the customer before calling on the prospect. ROBOREP would use this information to formulate a few good questions to fill in the blanks and complete its understanding of the customer’s situation. ROBOREP would be particularly interested in learning everything that it could about its customer’s customers. This information would allow ROBOREP to scan its product memory files to determine which products would best reach these people with the prospect’s message. ROBOREP would be programmed to prepare for every call so that it could avoid wasting either its time or the customer’s. The ROBOREP’s prime directive would not allow it to deceive a customer or to fail to live up to any commitments made to customers or coworkers.

Since Apple hasn’t announced the release of their new “I-ROBOREP” as yet, we poor humans will have to keep making sales. There is nothing in the description of the ROBOREP’s activities above that we can not do. The internet provides an amazing amount of information on even the smallest local accounts. According to the AdMall Forecast 71.2% of sales reps said that they find Facebook useful for keeping tabs on their customers. Taking the time to prepare for calls not only increases our success rate, but also streamlines the call allowing us to close more sales in less time.

On the flipside of the coin, the 2013 Media Sales Forecast asked buyers “What frustrates you the most about buying advertising?” Here are the top five items on their “naughty” list:

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1. "Getting ad proposals that are not relevant to my business." (42%)
2. "Rate increases without justification or audience increases." (40.6%)
3. "Justifying the cost/measuring success." (39.4%)
4. "Clutter (my ad getting lost among many others)." (35.8%)
5. "Not having enough budget to buy what works best." (33.2%)

We need to address these concerns in order to grow our papers and our incomes. Concern number one is a matter of preparation and of asking good questions. The AdMall Forecast points to a serious gap between how reps see themselves and how their clients see them. Over 82% of media sales people give themselves a grade of an "A" or "B" on "Understanding and applying the consultative sales approach," yet most buyers grade them much lower on the curve. Concerns 2, 3 and 5 involve selling the value of our products, highlighting the necessity of using third party research and collecting testimonials from existing advertisers. Concern number four, in a way, is a good problem to have. Our readers *and our publishers* like to see lots of ads in the paper. As sales consultants, we have a responsibility to create layouts for our advertisers that jump off the page and attract attention for their business.

### **"The Drudgery of the numbers will set you free!"**

In his great book, Managing, Hal Geneen said, "The drudgery of the numbers will set you free!" Many sales people are uncomfortable using research because they are not "number people." There is a reason that we chose sales careers rather than becoming cost accountants. We like words and we like people; statistics...not so much! The truth is that market research is not about numbers, it's about people and how they behave. Though we all like to think of ourselves as unique individuals, we share many things in common with the others in our peer groups. Until I find a crystal ball on clearance at Wal-Mart, market research is the only way to learn what our customers are thinking. When we know what they are thinking, we will know what motivates them. When we know what motivates them, we will be able to sell them more advertising. Though they don't often wear turbans or work behind beaded curtains, the best sales people are highly skilled "mind readers."

*This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.*

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