

Making cold calling count

Outbound calls are rarely welcomed with open arms. But, says **Diane Banister**, with a bit of careful planning you can ensure that every single one is effective

Is counting your outbound calls giving you the results you require or is it time to start making calls count?

When was the last time you hung up after receiving an unsolicited call and thought, "Wow. That was good"?

We've all been there; unwanted calls, "this is not a sales call", calls pushing products you don't need, callers that speak but don't appear to listen. Would you want to make these calls day-in, day-out with a quantity target over your head? No wonder absenteeism can be high, staff retention is low and creativity for manipulating call statistics is flourishing. In all our efforts to measure outbound call activity, how did we forget what it's like to be on the receiving end?

Whether it's a cold call or one from a company you know that just misses the mark, the impact of many calls is more "waste of time" than "wow." And if it's a waste of time for the customer, how useful was it for the firm making the call?

Companies keep doing it, and doing it badly, so there must be some pay off in this activity. But there's the key — it's "some pay off," rather than an optimum sales generator.

So, what if your outbound calls were delivered in a way that your customers want to receive them and your people take pride in making them? What if the dominant belief was "we can grow our business through relevant, appropriate outbound calls" rather than "if we phone enough people, we'll do the numbers"?

Sometimes the absence of a marketing strategy gives a "figures are low this month, get on the phones and make some sales" desperation to calls, doing nothing for the relationship. The problem that your outbound teams face is differentiating themselves from this approach, and with so much poor practice, that can be easy if you follow the right steps. The key question is whether we can evolve enough to use the telephone as an outbound tool to support our marketing strategy — and translate that strategy into conversations that not only deliver results, but also build long-term relationships.

Measuring calls has attracted much attention and investment in recent years. Technology now underpins every aspect of monitoring and measuring call quantities — and rightly so. The quality of an outbound call is harder to measure and often relates to long-term rather than immediate benefits with a customer or prospect. Hence the common scenario of volume-based targets that drive calls with varying quality of scripts, inconsistent messages, missed opportunities and annoyed customers. Shouldn't we pay attention to the impact of all this?

So what can outbound calls realistically achieve? This depends on whether you are trying to win new business or retain and grow the spend of your existing customer base.

You can make all your calls count if



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you break the sales process into a series of focused steps, each with their own objective and having a positive impact on the customer — whether the offer is accepted or declined.

But outbound is not limited to sales. It can also be a strong retention tool. Through true account management, calls with a genuine intent to help the customer — for example, providing updates on the impact of new services or industry legislation — provides an efficient means of keeping in contact with your customers. You may be

Outbound calls can be a strong customer retention tool

Do all of your calls count?

- Targeting: Have you selected relevant customers to call?
- Objective: Are you selling products or building relationships? Have you got a clear objective for each call?
- Sales process: Where does the call fit within your whole sales process? How much are you trying to achieve in one single call?
- Dialogue development process: Have you developed a dialogue that translates into a conversation that can flex to meet the objective and the needs of the customer?
- Brand: Is your call consistent with your brand values? What do you want the customer to think/feel after the call?
- Maintaining the standard: Are you prepared to monitor calls and coach staff to ensure that high standards stick?

surprised how many of your customers would prefer telephone contact over field sales visits for many of their needs.

Whatever the purpose of the call, it only takes little things to dramatically reduce its effect, especially in the opening moments. We decide in the first few seconds whether we want to take that call, so put effort into getting the beginning right and the call is easier to build.

At the start of the call, there must be a connection with the customer or prospect, truthfully explaining the reason for the call, but starting to lead a conversation. Mispronouncing a customer's name or reading quickly from a script will not work. "This is just a courtesy call..." can trivialise what would otherwise be a high impact message for the customer. It's all in the language and the crafting of conversation.

When you've crafted your dialogue, calls are easier to make. Every possible response is defined, the angles are all covered and your people are comfortable that they can achieve a result with every call. They contribute ideas, develop and refine dialogue, learn the process and apply it to the next campaign. The potential within your team flourishes and often produces other opportunities for them, growing the expertise of your organisation. Unrealistic? No. It just requires a little planning and investment of time.

So is quality too hard, too time consuming? Think about how much you have spent on call statistics recently — on software, systems and defining quantity targets? Now think how much you've invested in quality — in dialogue development, skills training, coaching and reviewing what makes an effective call. Which has the greatest effect on your customers?

Of course counting calls is essential — but it's even more important to make sure that every call counts. ■

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