

Break through the noise

Tips for getting your message heard amid the clutter

Question:

I call on data center directors and am having difficulty getting them to return my calls. How do I negotiate a meeting when I can't even speak to them?

Response:

Knowledge is power in a negotiation. So, in response to your question, I interviewed five data center directors whose companies range from \$70 million to \$35 billion. I asked them, "How do you handle sales inquiries?" Here's what I learned:

- Each one receives an average of 20 voicemails every day. The majority of calls come between 8 and 10:30 a.m. For this reason, three of the data center directors I interviewed don't answer their phone during this time, unless they recognize the person calling.
- Salespeople talk too much. The directors said the average voicemail they received was two to three minutes long. They all admitted to listening to only about 30 seconds of each message. If the salesperson didn't have anything unique or compelling to say, they deleted the message. They complained that if they did listen to every voicemail in its entirety, it would take 40 to 60 minutes every day. Yikes!
- The directors said that 99 percent of the messages they received were self-

oriented, not customer-oriented. An example they cited was when a salesperson says, "I'd like to meet with you to show you what we do," as opposed to something like, "We have an idea that has helped our clients reduce their space needs by as much as 20 percent without changing their existing equipment." The data center directors said that when a salesperson talks real results, they stand out.

- Most directors don't return sales rep calls. However, when a salesperson does get through to them, and they have been persistent, they will meet with them for a short time (less than 30 minutes).
- They blacklist indignant salespeople. When a salesperson leaves a message that says, "I've left you four messages and why haven't you returned my calls?" They are immediately eliminated from consideration. From their perspective, if a rep can't handle these little hurdles, they aren't fit to work in the data center arena.

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- If a salesperson's offering is not part of the director's strategic plan, they won't meet with the salesperson. The exceptions are when they have a trusting relationship with a rep who they already know or if they are looking to build a

new relationship to support a forthcoming initiative.

- They like gifts, but disdain manipulative promotions. One director told me he had received a fancy box with a remote control car in the mail from a large potential supplier. There was a hitch – the key that turned the car on would be given to the director after hearing the salesperson's pitch about a new product. The director refused the appointment, stating that the campaign was insulting. He gave the car to his 4-year-old.

Based on these findings, here are eight suggestions to enhance your success in securing a face-to-face meeting:

- 1. Be different.** Craft a short, compelling phone script that does not exceed 45 seconds. Time yourself so you minimize the risk of being deleted.
- 2. Be customer-oriented.** Highlight the results you have helped some of your clients achieve. This might sound like, "We work with the directors of IT at J.J. Black, Smotherby's and Goldstar and have helped them extend the life of their servers by eight months." If you don't have permission to use your customers' names, change your wording to, "We work with data center directors from many different industries to help them extend the life of their servers by eight months." With this simple sentence, you spark curiosity and help a director justify allocating time to meet with you.
- 3. Make calls in the afternoon.** Place your calls either just before the lunch hour or later in the day. I catch a lot of people at their desk when I call at 11:45 a.m.
- 4. Be persistent.** Leave a voice mail message every 10 days. This gives people

ample time to respond to you without becoming a nuisance. You can certainly call more frequently, but don't leave a message if you get their voice mail.

- 5. Be creative.** Send a gift without strings attached. Make it humorous, educational, something clever or of high perceived value. You want it to make a positive impression so it either prompts them to call you or to take your call when you call. A friend of mine owns a direct marketing firm called Johnson Direct. They send Hula Hoops to prospective customers with a catchy note. Recipients laugh, talk to their co-workers, and in some cases, even demonstrate their Hula Hoop mastery. In short, they brand themselves with a simple gift.
- 6. Ask for referrals.** Your current customers are a gold mine. Do you know where else have they worked? Who else do they know? Asking the simple question, "Who else do you know who might benefit from what we do even if they are not in the market right now?" might provide you with some great leads.
- 7. Develop a new strategy.** Ask yourself, "How do I add value while getting in front of key prospects?" For example, have you considered partnering with strategic alliances to develop a short 60- to 90-minute presentation to

prospective data center directors on the topic of "Data Center Best Practices." Invite them to attend free of charge. This provides you with an opportunity to demonstrate your competency and meet the key decision makers.

- 8. Create strategic alliances.** What other non-competing companies sell to the data center directors that would be open to creating a referral network with you? Identify five or six companies that are interested in expanding their market penetration and will share leads and contact information. This approach eliminates the time and hassle of researching each company and may also result in a referral by a trusted supplier.

Futurist Dan Burrus says, "Time is the currency of the new economy." In other words, time is as valuable as money. People will not hand it over to you without justifiable reason. Give them a compelling reason and they will make time for you.



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