

Build Revenue with Strategic Business Calls



by JOE RICKARD

“The strategic business call is essential to establishing the credibility of the print shop and its owner or manager with the customer.”

With printing technology’s rapid changes and competitors attempting to dislodge incumbents, strategic business calls should be part of every print shop’s selling strategy. What exactly is a strategic business call, you ask. Well, it’s a scheduled face-to-face meeting led by the print shop owner or manager with a targeted executive from one of the shop’s top accounts. Strategic business calls help print shop owners and managers gain a better understanding of their customers’ businesses. Using the knowledge gained from a strategic business call, shop owners and managers can position their businesses to become service providers instead of a commodity sources for the customer. This positioning technique allows shops to retain more customers and build new revenue streams. Every owner should implement strategic business calls as part of his or her print shop’s selling strategy, but when the print shop owner is the shop’s primary salesperson, strategic business calls play an even more important role.

Getting started

Most printing companies have a few clients that not only provide the majority of their current business but also have significant potential for additional business opportunities. Many printing companies get 80 percent of their business from 20 percent of their accounts; therefore, it is essential for shop owners and managers to be involved closely with their top customers.

When conducting a strategic business call, the first step is to identify the right contact for each top customer. The best approach to identifying this person is to discuss the account with your sales and production staff. The account’s existing contact person often will assist in deter-

mining the correct key contact person for the strategic business call. The key contact person should be the person who influences, manages or determines the account’s printing needs. As a rule, a shop manager or owner should meet with the highest-level contact person possible.

Remember a strategic business call is not a traditional sales call; it is an opportunity to meet one-to-one with your shop’s best customers. The objectives are to ensure your company is supporting the customer effectively and to set the stage for more business. If the account’s usual sales rep is not the manager or owner, it is important to ask the salesperson for help in preparing for the call; it is not necessary for the salesperson to be present for the actual meeting.

Adequate preparation is critical

Once the appropriate contact has been identified, it is important to thoroughly prepare for the meeting. The owner or manager should know the customer’s market, key competitors, product lines or services as well as the customer’s printing needs. The most important fact to know is the customer’s business performance. If the shop owner or manager is not the customer’s regular salesperson, it is important for them to work with the account’s salesperson to understand the customer fully. Also, owners or managers should brush up on their knowledge of key trends in the printing industry and be prepared to discuss their businesses in depth. All this information will help in the discussion and position the print shop owner or manager as a trusted advisor.

After thoroughly preparing for the meeting, it is time to make the appointment. Often, a CSR or regular salesperson assigned to an account is the proper person to schedule the meeting. Try to schedule the

meeting with the regular contact person at the account. It is never a good idea to go over the account's usual salesperson or regular contact person's head without his or her agreement.

Surprising or embarrassing your normal contact will lead to a break in trust and severely damage the relationship. Only when it is impossible to include the usual contacts should an owner directly request a meeting with the account's key contact person.

When making the request, the shop's representative should state that the meeting's purpose is to better understand the account's business needs and to share the shop's and the printing industry's key developments. After the appointment is scheduled, it is best for the shop owner or manager to personally confirm the meeting with the executive by phone and e-mail a confirmation.

Conducting the strategic business call

We have outlined seven steps for shop owners and managers to follow when making a successful strategic business call. If you are new to making strategic business calls, it might be best to start with the lower-volume accounts then move up to meeting with the shop's key accounts.

1. Introduction

Make the appropriate introductions, positioning yourself as the leader of the sales team. Explain why you are there and how your shop provides value to the account. Review the current relationship between the two companies.

2. Understand your customer's business

You should spend 50 percent of the meeting getting to know your customer's business, opportunities and challenges. Ask questions to confirm your understanding. Also,

look for opportunities to demonstrate your research and preparation. Let your customer do most of the talking.

3. Prioritize your customer's "top challenges and opportunities"

Summarize the discussion and state the top three challenges your customer has expressed. State these issues in a way that can be linked to printing, including how printing can be used to: help introduce new products and services; reduce time to market; control operational costs; generate new and retain existing customers; increase productivity; and address inventory concerns. Virtually every business challenge or opportunity can be supported by a creative printing product or service.

4. Position your company as a strategic printing services company

Provide a brief overview of your company and how it is committed and positioned to support the customer.

5. Explain your company's "value-added" competencies and capabilities

You might have a few documents, brochures or other printed samples that demonstrate your company's "value-added" competencies and capabilities. Share your company's unique values but keep the handouts to a minimum.

6. Match your customer's greatest challenges to your company's capabilities and products

You should be prepared to offer at least two new solutions your shop can provide to help your customer's business. Possible solutions include: mailing services management, on-demand printing, variable-data printing, brochure

design, database management, low-cost printing and innovative direct mail printing.

7. Agree on next steps

Gain agreement on a series of follow-up actions that will lead your company to acquire additional business or keep existing business. Your goal is to create at least two new business opportunities.

Possible follow-up actions include: making a return sales call about a particular solution for the customer, making sales calls to others in the company, creating a proposal for new business, acquiring further information and conducting a study based on the information learned. Gaining agreement on these follow-up actions and executing them are key steps and provide the payoff for a successful meeting.

Every print shop owner and most managers are capable of making this kind of call. It is simply one businessperson talking to another. The strategic business call is essential to establishing the credibility of the print shop and its owner or manager with the customer. Meetings are successful when owners or managers walk away with a better understanding of their customers and a list of solid next steps that will lead to more business.

Making it a success

Tips for making a successful strategic business call include:

- Don't sell a product;
- This is a one-to-one meeting, don't bring the customer's usual salesperson and CSR;
- Listen to your customer and let him or her do most of the talking;
- Be prepared for objections;
- Most customers have little understanding of standard printing terms so don't use printing acronyms

SMALL SHOP SELLING

and jargon;

- Don't assume your customer understands what it is like to run a small business;
- Practice stating your company's unique value;
- Bring printing samples; and
- Prepare a follow-up letter that thanks the customer for the meeting, restates the print shop's value and outlines agreed next steps.

Perhaps Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer described a strategic business call's greatest value when he said, "We can believe that we know where the world should go. But, unless we're in touch with our customers, our model of the world can diverge from reality. There's no substitute for innovation, of course, but innovation is no substitute for being in touch, either."

A strategic business call is a powerful strategy for print shop owners and managers. For owners and managers who master it, the results will be more knowledge about and a stronger relationship with their best customers and more importantly, increased revenue. ●

Joe Rickard is a sales training leader and consultant who works with printing and technology companies to improve their sales effectiveness. He is the founder of Intellective Solutions, a provider of customized sales and sales management training material and services. Contact Rickard at 845-753-6156, jrickard@intellectives.com or visit www.Intellectives.com