

30 Seconds to a Great First Impression

By Joe Rickard

It takes 30 seconds to win or lose a sale. In the sales profession that 30-second first impression could cost or earn you the biggest sale of your life.

There is no better use of time and effort for printing salespeople than creating a positive first impression with executives who control buying decisions for print and print services. Studies show that in the first 30 seconds or less of initial meeting, buyers have already made a lasting and unshakable perception of the salesperson.

Salespeople tell me that it is unfair for customers to judge them solely on their first impression. Unfortunately, human nature dictates that the initial contact proves to be the image that lasts in a person's mind. Once the image is set in a customer's mind, it is very difficult to change it. In selling, you seldom get that second chance.

It is those first 30 feet of your entrance, the first 30 seconds of the sales call, and the first 30 words you speak that can determine the course of the potential sale.

Creating interest with decision makers is a key sales skill. The chief purpose of any initial approach call with an executive is to create enough interest in a printing company's offerings, to obtain their permission to gather requirements within the account. Without this agreement, the sale cannot go further. It is this step that determines whether a customer is a qualified prospect. Creating a great first impression is crucial to the eventual sale.

Here is a scenario: A New York metro printing salesperson has heard from a college friend that a large wholesaler of scientific testing equipment has hired a new director of marketing. His college buddy is a neighbor and a good friend of the director of marketing. The wholesaler has more than 2,500 distributors worldwide who sell some or all of their products. The printing salesperson, after numerous phone calls and e-mails, was able to obtain an appointment to meet the director of marketing. The marketing team managed by the director has a substantial budget for printing and is looking for new ideas. This scenario is every salesperson's dream. It may be an opportunity to gain a new customer.

In this scenario, most salespeople know that it is very important to make a great first impression. Too often we have seen salespeople miss great sales opportunities by not walking through the door with the confidence and the knowledge to take control of a room and get people to want to listen.

The Threshold 30

A lot has been written and discussed about the "Threshold 30." It is those first 30 feet of your entrance, the first 30 seconds of the sales call, and the first 30 words you speak that can determine the course of the potential sale.

During the past few years some the rules of the initial engagement have changed. One major change is the impact of e-mail, cell phones, and Web sites. It's common for customers to already have an impression of the salesperson. It would be already positive if the customer agrees to meet with you. That means the first 30 seconds of the physical meeting must be conducted flawlessly to maintain that positive impression.

Being on time for the first meeting with your executive is absolutely essential. Outside of a significant personal event, being late on the first call will be almost impossible to overcome.

Jack Emery, vice president of Hammer IQ, a division of The Hammer Co., Parsippany, N.J., recommends that printing salespeople need to go beyond presenting a list of capabilities and products to prospects. He advises salespeople today to quickly establish a professional image that projects knowledge of the customer's business, confidence, and accountability. The objective is to build a foundation for a "Trusted Advisor" role versus the common "quote and hope" relationship.

Here's how to make a great impression:

Suit Up

There is no set dress rule other than dressing appropriately and neatly. Customer, company culture, and policies dictate how employees dress. This is not a useful guide for outside salespeople. Customer expectations for salespeople who sell high dollar solutions are different than they are for employees. If in doubt, go with a business suit (men and woman) for the first call.

Non-Verbal Communications

Non-verbal interaction is a significant factor in influencing a customer's first impression. Body language is important. A UCLA study found that body language alone accounts for more than 55 percent of communications. Projecting a friendly, open manner and greeting the customer by name, as if they are only person in the world, is a critical step. The executive needs to be the center of your attention. An appropriate (not too hard) firm handshake, direct eye contact, and sincere winning smile will get you off to a good start.

Take on mannerisms and a posture that are consistent with the customer. For instance, as a young salesperson, I was taught to walk into a room, greet my customer with a firm handshake, and make a strong initial impression. After a few failed calls, I asked my manager why he thought I was struggling. He explained to me that because I am a

big/tall person that I came on too strong when I walked into a room. What I thought was confidence was perceived as aggression and some customers were intimidated. He suggested that I slow down and not walk into the room like a defensive lineman, especially if my customer was smaller in stature.

Project Confidence

If confidence is a major ingredient in creating an "executive presence," then knowledge of the customer's business and customer will greatly add to a positive image in delivering your first 30 words. Doing your homework, and thoroughly researching the company you are calling on, will provide a logical talk track that describes who you are, why you are there, and the specific value you and your company can bring to the organization. Before you meet that customer, practice the first 30 words until you are completely confident.

Minimize Small Talk

It is important to have a good sense of humor but in the first seconds of the initial meeting avoid attempts at jokes. It is dangerous to talk about anything that can be perceived as awkward or could be misconstrued as inappropriate. Prior to the call, keep the small talk as innocuous as possible. Give up the old habit of trying to make a friend of the prospect on the first call.

Creating a good first impression for many salespeople can be challenging but it is an essential sales skill. As with many other things, it can be improved through practice. Getting feedback from customers, other salespeople or your manager who have observed your calls would be a good first step. No printing salesperson can survive in this profession for long without continuously prospecting for new customers. Rather than generating a steady stream of quotes to print buyers, focus on making impactful sales calls, where you are keenly aware of the "Threshold 30."

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