

Firing a Salvo

Businesswoman perfecting a task very few marketing executives even want to try



By Harlan Levy

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To say the least, a cold-calling telemarketer's job is not an enviable position.

Annoyance, hostility, sometimes a threat of violence is the reaction a telemarketer often confronts in the effort to make a sale to people he or she does not know, especially when the call comes to a home at dinner time.

But for small businesses, cold-calling other businesses that buy the cold-caller's type of products is a necessary and accepted form of marketing.

Doing it successfully is an art. The marketer — often the company's president — needs to do it the right way to bring in new or repeated business. But many just don't have the knack or the time.

That's where Susan Salvo, a Manchester business consultant, comes in.

For the last three years, Salvo through her one-woman company Revenue Generators LLC has been coaching cold-calling small business owners and marketers trying to get in front of the decision-makers who might buy their products.

Her "students" call on such targets as hospitals, physicians, financial services firms, the construction industry, and schools — essentially every business type but retail.

"The toughest job is the person who calls on physicians," Salvo says. "They're a tough group to get to. Physicians are very busy and they don't typically deal with vendors."

Next toughest challenge? "My clients who sell something that creates change in an organization, where they're looking to change culture when the buyers don't know they need the service," Salvo says.

Salvo's clients' goal is to get meetings with senior level executives, i.e., chief executive officers, chief financial officers, chief information officers, and chief technology officers.

Client Phil Harriau, head of market research firm The Caney Group, in Monroe, thinks she's mastered the art. So does Scott Griswold, founder of Walden Ltd., of West Hartford.

After working with Salvo for a year and a half, Harriau and his Caney Group had netted a \$200,000 series of consulting jobs with international consumer product giant Unilever, which makes Bird's Eye frozen foods, Dove soap, Lipton Tea, Slim-Fast, and Hellman's Mayonnaise.

"She just made a big impact on our business," Harriau said. "She was teaching me how to do a better job at cold-calling, and it worked so well we got buys, and I had to stop doing some of the calling myself, so I changed my arrangement so she would do my calling for me."

The key was the script. "A good quality phone script can get that foot in the door if delivered by someone professional," Harriau said. "She's not like a telemarketer. She really works best calling on professional prospects."

Scott Griswold's one-man consulting company Walden Ltd. sells "technology-based solutions" to physicians. His niche market is automated patient reminders, electronic chart creation, and eligibility scanning. Salvo started working with him three years ago.

"She got me probably 10 customers," said Griswold, who previously did consulting work for Pfizer, General Electric, Citibank, and other large companies. "At one point she was getting me two to three appointments per week. Every dollar I spent in using her service I got between four and five times as much in gross revenues from the customers she got me."

Griswold doubts he could have gotten those customers on his own. "I'm a techy, geeky guy, and I don't have the marketing skill sets to make that initial contact."

The Salvo approach

Salvo either teaches her clients how to make cold calls and set up meetings, or she charges them to do it herself.

If it's necessary, her clients must first do research to identify appropriate prospects.

She also finds and sets up purchases of appropriate contact manager databases to put their leads in.

"Some don't have a list of prospects to call. People may have a small list of prospects, but they may not have a robust lead source with thousands of leads," Salvo says. "People come to me and say, 'I have a list of 50 prospects. Is that enough?' And I say no. Typically I work with people who at least have a database of 500 prospects or more."

To prepare for an approach to be made by a client or by Salvo herself, she then helps the clients write introduction letters to their prospects. The letters succinctly describe the client's offerings and says a phone call will follow to try to set up a meeting.

If Salvo makes the call, she says she'll schmooze with the prospective customer if that seems appropriate or keep it no-nonsense.

"I am able to read the prospect by the tone of their voice and how receptive they are to my client's service or offering," she says.

That certainly describes her modus operandi but does not describe how she consistently can get to speak with her targets when her clients can't get to first base. So what's her secret?

"It's a numbers game," Salvo says. "It takes a lot of phone calls to set meetings. It takes about 50 phone calls to different prospects to set one meeting."

A second factor is the database, which Salvo carefully selects to include companies that shop or should shop for the products her clients sell.

The third factor is what to say on the phone calls.

"I'm just very engaging with the prospect," she explains. "I try to get them chatting about non-business-related topics, cocktail-type conversation. Most people don't want to chat, but some do."

For example, on prospective customer she called was chief executive officer of a software company.

"I could tell he was Indian by his accent and last name," Salvo recalls, "so I took a chance and said 'Namaste' which means 'hello' in Hindi. He says, 'You speak Hindi?' I talked to him for a half hour about food, yoga, traveling — I used to be in the travel business. And then at the end I asked him if he'd set a meeting. He said probably so, and my client met him and actually did business with him."

Some are not chatty and only want to know about the products for sale, fee structure, and the like, Salvo says, and she always has the authority to talk knowledgeably about those items.

Her clients did not have her approach before they hired her, she says.

"They didn't have a methodology," she says. "They'd just pick up the phone and try to wing it. They don't have a process. I help them write a script for talking to the prospect. I help them write an effective voice-mail message that will get a return phone call."

Brevity is key, Salvo says, "not to leave voice mail that goes on and on and on. Tell them who you are, the company name, that you're following up on a letter: 'Here's what I do, and I'd like to set up a meeting.' Some people ramble on and on in their voice mail. It needs to have a sense of purpose."

It's not brain surgery, she says. "But when people tell me I made five calls and haven't gotten a meeting, I'll tell them to go back and make 45 more, and then they'll probably get a meeting. I just don't think people realize how many calls it takes to get a meeting."

Making 50 or 100 phone calls takes time. But Salvo's clients are busy servicing the customers they have and don't have the time, she says.

Those who do "just hate it," she says, "and don't know what to say, and are uncomfortable. They're great when they're in front of the customers, but they feel awkward talking to someone they don't know."

To date, Salvo has what appears to be a respectable client list. Besides Harriau and Griswold, she cites a woman in South Carolina who sells training, a business in Avon that sells loyalty card programs, and in Windsor a manufacturer who sells titanium to Pratt & Whitney, Hamilton Sundstrand, and other big companies.

"What mistakes do they make? They find the phone to be very heavy," Salvo says. "They don't like picking up the phone and actually making the calls, but they need to make calls on a consistent basis."

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