



## Ready, Set, Close

### Preparing Your Phone Reps for Selling Success

In a catalog call center we visited recently, the phone reps were being asked to up-sell one of the company's new products at the end of the order-taking process. Rachel, one of the newest reps in the center, was regularly offering the product on every single call, and enjoying a pretty good conversion rate. Alex, a more seasoned employee who was actually more skilled than Rachel, did not offer the product on a single call we observed. And Sarah, another fairly new employee made some attempts but without much success.

What's wrong with this picture? Is it a matter of having the wrong people in the job? Not enough training? Insufficient compensation? Inconsistent policies and procedures? The wrong scripts?

There is more and more focus in today's call center on selling. And whether it's an outbound center whose sole purpose is telemarketing, or a traditional inbound customer service center that has decided to seize the opportunity and gain some additional revenues through an up-sell/cross-sell process, it's becoming increasingly important to polish sales skills.

This article will address the three critical steps in setting up a successful telephone selling program.

#### **Step 1: Identify the Right People.**

The most critical factor in successful selling is getting the right people for the job in the first place. Therefore the first step in the process is a careful screening and profiling of candidates to see who is most likely to be successful and happy in a sales role. Whether you're hiring new employees, or simply identifying people in your existing call center to move into more of a sales role, making the match is critical.

According to Kathy Dean, Senior Partner with Banks and Dean, a company specializing in call center recruiting and screening, "The most critical attribute in predicting sales success on the job is whether a person has 'enterprising' or 'initiating' traits, as opposed to 'responding' traits which are predictors of customer service success. Potential sales reps must be willing and wanting to sell."

One of the ways to determine candidates' fit is to determine what motivates them. Are they motivated by money? A challenge? The satisfaction of helping someone or solving a problem? Those motivated by money or a challenge will likely find sales a rewarding experience. On the other hand, the candidates whose test scores show they are adverse to risk probably won't make good sellers, since hearing "no" is a frequent part of any sales process.

Dean recommends that a company wishing to increase its sales effectiveness screen potential candidates and group them by strengths. Typically there will be three groups: ones with natural sales talent and attributes, those with "trainable" talent, and those with low potential for sales. While the people in the latter group might make excellent service reps, investing in sales training for this group is likely to yield little return.



The other two groups however can benefit from a sales training process. Let's discuss now what this sales training should entail.

### **Step 2: Deliver Targeted Training.**

Once you've identified the right people for the job, the next step is to equip them with the knowledge and skills to make the sale. A successful sales training program should include a variety of components in order to prepare front-line reps to persuade customers to say "yes!"

In addition to the obvious training about the products or services to be sold, it's also important to cover the basics of telephone selling. Tracy Laycock, General Manager of Phone Pro, one of the industry's premier telephone skills training companies, offers the following suggestions about what to include in a telesales program.

1. Customer profiling. It's important to understand what the customer's "pain" is so a product or service can be positioned to alleviate it. Customer profiling includes recognizing a prospect's readiness to buy.
2. Effective opening. The first 15 seconds of a call play a significant role in whether the prospect buys into the sales process. Sales reps need to learn to deliver an opening to establish an atmosphere of cooperation and trust.
3. Information probing. Effective listening is critical to discover the prospect's needs and wants. Even if the up-sell item has already been determined, good listening skills will help with formulating the selling strategy.
4. Overcoming objections. Unlike the traditional "combat zone" approach, managing resistance is really about learning how to help buyers reach a "comfort zone" that enables the conversation and sale to go forward.
5. Improving voice tone. Something as simple as tone of voice can have a significant effect on a sale. Sales reps should know the basic techniques of making a good impression not only with what they say, but how they say it.
6. Fine-tuning vocabulary. Buyer response can be improved simply by using more positive phrasing and eliminating negative vocabulary from the sales call. Sales reps should have a full repertoire of visual words, affirming sentences, and motivating phrases to improve customer response.
7. Closing the sale. The close of the sales call is every bit as critical as the opening. Sales reps should know how to ask for a decision, whether it's taking an order or arranging for a follow-up call.

The types of training mentioned above can be delivered in a variety of ways. More and more e-learning options exist where students can proceed through a prescribed sales training course at their own pace. However, given the degree of practice that's needed to get all the skills and steps right, instructor-led training with a knowledgeable facilitator will typically yield better and longer-term results. And to maximize the impact of the sales training program, you'll want to follow up with frequent side-by-side coaching to fine-tune the newly learned skills even further.



### **Third Step: Measure and Reward.**

We can't really talk about selling without talking about incentive programs. The type of reward system and the way it's administered is the third critical ingredient in a successful selling program.

Those call centers whose sole purpose is to make outbound calls and sell typically have a simpler, more direct policy on the call process and on incentives. Policies are generally not so well defined for inbound call centers, especially those that serve primarily as service or support centers. Each organization must make a policy decision on the degree to which up-selling will be attempted and how it will be rewarded.

First, will agents be expected to attempt the up-sell on every call? Or will they be able to select the callers that appear to be good up-sell candidates? Some organizations force the up-sell on every call and obviously maximize their potential incremental revenue. But in some cases, this up-sell is done at the risk of damaging the service component of the call and the overall customer relationship.

For example, I recently placed a catalog order, and being in a bit of a hurry, I told the agent taking my order that the one item was all I wished to order. This catalog always offers a few up-sell items, and generally I don't mind hearing about the specials, but on this occasion, I was ready to simply finish up my order and move on. Even after saying I did not wish to order anything else or hear about specials, the agent proceeded through the up-sell script anyway. When I expressed my displeasure about the offer, the agent explained that she "was forced to offer the additional items" on every single call.

Clearly, this was a case where the agent should have had the flexibility to go with the flow of the call. Doing so would have done more to solidify the customer relationship so that I'd be back for another order in the future. While it's understandable that organizations want staff to up-sell if reps are available and the queue is under control, it's my opinion that it should not be forced on every call.

Some organizations would argue that unless it's forced, some reps (like Alex in our first example) simply won't do it. The reasons they won't voluntarily do it in most cases, are 1) they're personality types that are afraid of rejection, and/or 2) they haven't been properly trained on how to do it. Do the first two steps of hiring and training properly, and you should have a workforce that's willing and able to up-sell. Then I believe you can leave the decision in the agents' hands about when it's appropriate to up-sell or not.

With respect to incentives, one of the most common questions is whether to compensate for "making the offer" versus "making the sale". While the first will certainly increase the number of attempts, these attempts might be poorly timed or delivered. A better policy is to reward the actual sales results, or at least a combination or ratio of the two. You may have measures that evaluate the ratio of offers to sales or simply the ratio of sales to the number of calls handled. Another possibility is to look at sales per signed-on minute to evaluate staff productivity.



## Now the Up-Sell

Now that we've sold you on the three steps of a basic selling program, would you like to read about some special tips for the telephone selling process?

Now that wasn't so hard, was it? And with an enticing enough offer, your phone up-sell should be well accepted as well!

Here are some final up-selling tips for your phone reps:

1. Fully complete the original sale before the up-sell process begins. Sometimes in the rush to offer the add-on product, an agent forgets some detail of the original order. Pushing additional items too early may turn off the customer and jeopardize the original sale.
2. Offer familiar items in the up-sell. The more familiar a customer is with the add-on item, the more likely he is to buy. New products take time to explain and sell, so up-selling is not the time to sell these unless the price is incredibly low.
3. Provide useful advice based on other customer purchases. Your marketing department can provide you the correlations to fill in the blanks, "Many of our customers who order a \_\_\_ also order a \_\_\_ to go with it. Would you like one also?"
4. Limit up-sell items to less than 25% of the original order. Even if customers are open to the up-sell, they generally have a mental limit of the amount they're willing to spend and in the numbers we've seen, it's typically 25% or less.
5. Finally, think of up-selling as dessert. Picture yourself in a nice restaurant after a lovely meal. The waiter comes by to see if you'd like dessert. Perhaps you're too full from dinner to consider it, but you're certainly not offended that he asked. Getting agents to think about up-selling as a nice "dessert" offering can sometimes go a long way to overcoming the reluctance to make the offer.

Creating a successful selling or up-selling program is a matter of putting the right people on the phones, training them properly, and creating policies and incentives to make them successful. Once in place, you'll be able to maximize your dialogues with customers and impact the bottom line significantly. Happy selling!



**About the Author....**

Penny Reynolds is a Founding Partner of **The Call Center School**, a Nashville, Tennessee based consulting and education company. The company provides a wide range of educational offerings for call center professionals, including traditional classroom courses, web-based seminars, and self-paced e-learning programs at the manager, supervisor, and front-line staff level. For more information, see [www.thecallcenterschool.com](http://www.thecallcenterschool.com) or call 615-812-8400.

