

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

The Art of Follow Up

Every once in a while, someone will leave your store without making a purchase. Maybe the client has to pick up kids at school. Maybe he wants to check the Internet for a lower price. Maybe you blew the close or mishandled the customer's objections, and he's headed for your competitor. Whatever the reason, the client's gone. What now?

The customer whisperer doesn't panic when he realizes he can't close a sale immediately. He'll use his calm, assertive leadership to guide prospects through the decision-making process, even after they've left his store. Many of his sales come from his disciplined follow-up protocol.

Only two things can prevent active follow up: not getting a name and phone number or e-mail address, or losing track of that information. But a customer whisperer always gets the client's name and number, and he has an organized system for keeping track of them.

Lazy sales associates often claim 60, 70 or 80 percent of their sales occur on the first visit, so there's no need to follow up. Even the worst sales associates close 100 percent of the people who actually buy something from them. However, since half of high-end sales occur after the customer's first visit, these sales associates could double their incomes if they cultivated the prospects who got away. These associates rarely hear from anyone who bought somewhere else. Good salespeople know some

customers — usually about 10 percent — buy elsewhere. They know because they follow up, and they learn how to better compete in the future. Those who don't make follow-up calls never find out about lost sales and never learn from the painful but useful lessons.

Anyone can implement a follow-up protocol that will increase sales with little or no cost. The

three essential elements of a successful follow-up system include *acquisition*, *organization* and *execution*.

ACQUISITION

Obviously, you can't follow up with someone if you don't know his or her name. If you don't get a client's name when you greet him, he is unlikely to give it to you as he's leaving. People love to hear their names, so get it early and use it often. Then, at the appropriate moment, say, "Bill, let me jot down

+ CUSTOMER WHISPERER:

A calm/assertive sales associate who gently turns prospects into customers.

your number, so we can stay in touch?" Once you are writing, it's easy to get an address and cell phone number if you just keep asking for more information. Don't forget to ask, "Would you prefer to be contacted by e-mail?"

Often, people ask for literature or a business card as a way to say goodbye. This customer whisperer never seems to be able to find literature at this delicate moment, but he always promptly mails a brochure if he has the prospect's address. He does the same with Web links. Use the presentation of your business card as an opportunity to get a customer's name and number. It's easy and natural when there's an exchange of information.

If your prospect is hesitant, give him a good reason to provide his contact information. Remind potential clients that you'll be mailing your next newsletter soon, or offer to send an e-mail link to a great article you've recently read. It's easier than you think to gather vital contact information if you make a reasonable effort.



Successful follow up is equal parts organization, persistence and a carefully crafted message

ORGANIZATION

All the prospect names in the world are useless if you can't find them. There are many contact relationship management programs available for tracking prospects. Goldmine is my favorite, but Microsoft Outlook or even a free Gmail account offer everything needed to keep contact records organized.

Losing track of a prospect can be expensive. In 1996, I attempted to sell my house without a realtor. As my deadline approached, I finally listed the property with a real estate agent. The agent asked me if there were any prospects I wanted to "exclude." I only remembered one seriously interested party. After about 15 minutes rummaging through business cards with notes on the back and scraps of paper, I gave up and signed the form.

At 9:00 the next morning, my agent called to tell me she had an offer on the house. "But you haven't shown it to anyone," I said. "You just got the listing last night."

"You showed him the house a few weeks ago," she said.

Losing that name cost me \$18,000. I wish I could say that was the last name this customer whisperer ever lost.

My second example is more painful, if less expensive, than the first and ironically happened as I was writing this article. In our store, we operate under the Rule of 21. The Rule of 21 states that it's impossible to make 21 calls without something good happening. I've never seen it fail.

A piano store can be a lonely place in the summertime. To stir up business, I instructed everyone to make 21 calls. Being an employee whisperer, I set the pace and started dialing. After exhaust-

ing my call list and even working through the next two weeks' calls, I was having trouble getting to 21, and nothing good happened.

Finally, in a folder with some old notes, I found the name of a prospect I had met at a charity ball six months ago. Somehow, her contact info never made it into Goldmine. When she answered the phone, I reminded her who I was and asked if it was a good time to call.

"We were just thinking about you," she said. "We really wanted a baby grand player piano, and we just bought one last week."

Oh, the pain! The humiliation! If I had typed her name into my computer right after we met, I would have followed up and sold her a piano.

A few calls later, I made an appointment with someone who had been on my list for eight years, thus vindicating the Rule of 21. The next day, I got an e-mail reply from someone who had never answered the phone or replied to an e-mail before. Tiny steps lead to

big sales. The Rule of 21 rules!

Along with organizing vital data like names, addresses and phone numbers, it's important to note your impressions and use key words that will jog your memory later. Wouldn't it be great to search your prospect list for "white guitar" after taking a cream-colored Les Paul on trade and have three names of interested prospects pop up? It won't happen if you don't put the information into your system in the first place. You can't call to ask if little Sally is ready to start music lessons if you don't know her parents' names, how to reach them and that the kid's name is Sally. These calls will happen if you have the information, and your best chance of recording the information is immediately after you first meet your client. A customer whisperer is an information magnet, constantly acquiring, storing and updating client data.

An ancillary benefit of a disciplined follow-up system is a long list of pre-qualified, potential customers. We are

currently coming out of the most dramatic business downturn in a generation (or two). One difference between those who have survived and those who have failed is the size and quality of their prospect lists. It costs very little to call or e-mail a prospect, and there's plenty of time for follow up during soft business cycles.

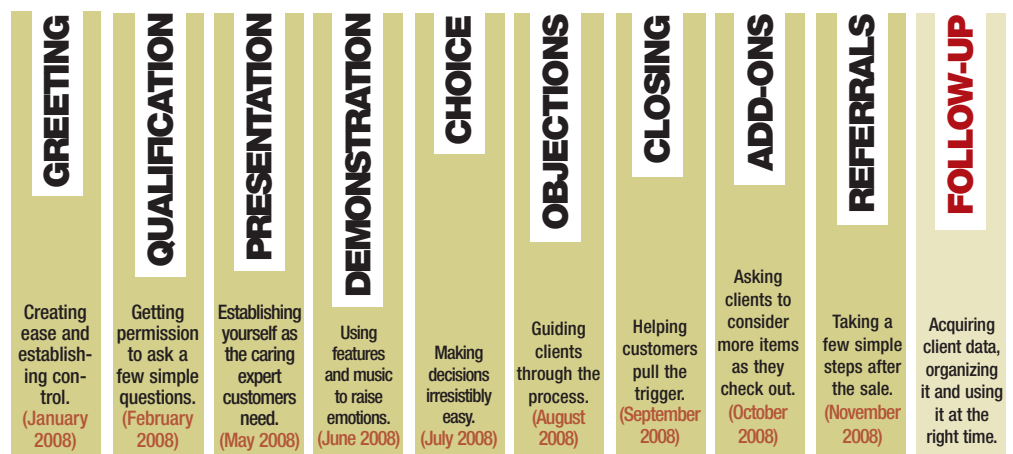
The most effective direct-response campaigns are done with your own lists. Dealers still having success at college piano sales report making up to 4,000 phone calls prior to the events. They can only make the calls if they have the phone numbers. An e-mail blast to people who gave you their addresses and know who you are can be very rewarding. Distributing your newsletter via e-mail is virtually free.

EXECUTION

An organized prospect list is of little use until you pick up the phone, mail a card or click "send." Who to call, when to call and how often to call are important questions but not as

THE SALES PROCESS

The customer whisperer organizes the sales process into 10 stages. For those he has already discussed, we've given a brief explanation and the issue of *Music Inc.* they appeared in. Go to musicincmag.com to download these articles.



important as what to say when you call. In simpler times, we believed the only reason to call a prospect was to get them back in the store. Today, a nuanced approach is more effective, and a compelling message is imperative. There are so many communication channels now that our prospects are literally bombarded with information. The tone, timing and content of a message are critically important.

A customer whisperer invests copious effort into becoming a trustworthy, helpful expert during greeting, qualification and presentation. The tone of his follow-up message must reinforce rather than diminish his stature. He needs to craft his message carefully. “Hi, how ya doin’, did you want to buy that trumpet before it’s gone because some guy was lookin’ at it?” was never a productive approach and won’t work today.

The first follow-up call should be a thank you for visiting the store. Go on to find out if there were any questions that came up after the client left. This call can be made within hours and never more than 24 hours, even if you have to call from home on a Sunday afternoon. Start with, “Did I catch you at a convenient time? Do you have just a moment?” There are many reasons why someone might not want to talk right now, and the sooner you find out, the better. A handwritten, “thank you for visiting” note or an e-message should also be sent before you leave work each day.

You will be amazed by the things you’ll discover when you call. Every once in a while, you’ll find out the prospect went directly to your competitor and made a purchase. As painful as this is, it’s a powerful lesson. If you don’t make the

call, you don’t learn the lesson.

The customer whisperer finds it useful to plant a follow-up seed as a prospect is leaving the store. An “I’ll e-mail the manufacturer and find out if they make it in pink and get back to you,” or “I’ll check to see if it’s available at the warehouse and give you a call,” puts you in an enviable position. Before your client has even made a purchase, you have made a commitment to him. With your first follow-up call, you keep your promise and demonstrate competence and efficiency.

TELEPHONE

When you dial the phone these days, you are more likely to get voicemail than a live person. Here are two hard and fast rules about voicemail:

1. Always leave a message.
2. Never leave a second message.

That’s right: You have to leave a message because everyone has caller ID. And once you’ve left a message, you cannot call again for a week. There’s a thin line between vigilant follow up and stalking. The customer whisperer treads that line with diligence and discretion. How do you feel about people who don’t leave a message or people who leave several messages? The good news is every caller ID flash or pleasant voicemail makes a more powerful impression than a billboard or TV ad — and it’s free!

Keep your message brief. “Hi, this is Sherman from The Piccolo Hut at 555-5555. No need to call back. I just wanted to let you know this important and relevant piece of information. If you need to reach me, I’m at 555-5555.”

It’s important to keep messages short and have the phone number at both ends. Listening

‘If you’re having trouble reaching prospects, you are seven times more likely to reach them between 9 and 10 in the morning.’

to a long message a second time to get to the number at the end is irritating. Potential clients are only going to call back if they want to, so why not take the pressure off by not imposing a demand for a reply? (Remember to note the time and what you said for future reference.)

Properly timing your calls is easy with a little forethought. People use caller ID to screen calls, and people have lifestyle habits, so it’s important to keep accurate notes on when you called and the result. If there’s no answer at 11 a.m. on a weekday, you are better off not calling again at 11 a.m. on a weekday.

Here are a few specifics to keep in mind:

- Soccer moms are pretty busy from after-school hours until bedtime, and they usually put their babies down for a nap after lunch.
- Older people get up and go to bed early and tend to eat lunch at noon.
- Working people are trying to clear their desks at 11:30 and 4:30 and may resent interruption.
- Nobody wants a phone call during dinner.

If you’re having trouble reaching prospects, you are

seven times more likely to reach them between 9 and 10 in the morning. If you establish a habit of making calls before your store opens, your calls will get made. (Does this routine sound familiar: get coffee, greet coworkers, open mail and answer e-mail before making the first call ... at 11:30?) Calling early only one day a week can have a dramatic effect on your sales total. Trust the customer whisperer: Time on the phone between 9 and 10 a.m. is golden.

E-MAIL

There are people who prefer to communicate with e-mail. God bless ’em. E-mail is the most efficient way to communicate with prospects. E-mail gives you the opportunity to present your case fully without interruption, and people are in the habit of clicking “reply.”

Here are some e-mail follow-up tips:

- Be polite and neat. Too many correspondents suspend manners, grammar and punctuation in e-mail.
- Keep it short.
- Always try to include a Web link.
- Never send an attachment unless it’s a picture you took specifically for them. People are afraid of attachments with good reason.
- If you must send a picture, make sure it’s a low-resolution picture.
- Provide a reason for a reply.
- Keep responding, and keep the dialogue alive by asking questions.

REASONS TO FOLLOW UP

The biggest challenge of follow up, once you have established a follow-up habit, is coming up with a good reason to call or write. This is your opportunity to get creative.

Information, product updates and new arrivals will only get you so far. The customer whisperer makes a point of calling for reasons unrelated to sales. The best reason to call is to extend an invitation.

The most important reason to host events is to give salespeople a reason to call prospects and invite them. Don't rely on snail mail. In fact, follow up on mail! A phone call after your client has received an invitation makes both more powerful.

An event gives you the opportunity to say, "I just wanted to invite you to the recital we are having at the store Thursday night at 7 p.m. The artist is terrific, and you'll have a chance to meet him and get a picture and autograph. Would you like me to reserve seats for you and a friend?" After a few of these calls, the customer whisper becomes the guy who's always making an invitation rather than the guy who's always trying to sell something. A prospect who comes to an event after a personal invitation becomes a friend.

Here's a short list of reasons to call:

1. Guess what just came in (new product, trade-in, rental return)?
 2. We finally got that guitar set up (or piano tuned). You have to come in and play it.
 3. I read this article and thought about you. Would you like me to send you a copy?
 4. One of your favorite artists is playing in town this weekend. I thought you'd want to know.
 5. I wanted to invite you and your friend to an event here at our store.
 6. We're getting ready to mail the next newsletter, and I wanted to make sure your address is correct or find out if you'd prefer to receive it via e-mail.
- Each contact should provide a reason for the client to act.

HOW OFTEN?

The most common question presumptive customer whisperers ask is, "How often can I call without becoming a stalker or an aggravation?" Obviously, it depends on the relationship you have developed with the prospect. Use common sense, and follow these general guidelines.

1. First call: Later that day or first thing the next morning.
2. Thank-you note or e-mail: Before leaving work.
3. Second call: 72 hours or the day

your note arrives.

4. Next e-mail or phone call: Once a week for three weeks. (An unanswered e-mail can be resent a week later.)

5. Call after every mass mailing to make sure the customer got it.

6. Call or write anytime you have something important to say.

Every so often, someone will blow you off, ask you to stop calling or scream at you. This is a good thing. It tells you that you're making enough calls.

There is no way to know what's happening at the other end of the line. Your prospect might have been asleep, gotten bad news, had a fight with one of the kids or hit his thumb with a hammer. Often, you can call a surly prospect a few weeks later, and he'll be happy to hear from you. If a prospect really has lost interest, we need to know, so we can spend our time with prospects who are interested.

If a prospect has purchased elsewhere, we can remind him about our excellent service department and call back in a few months to find out if he's interested in trading up. People who buy musical instruments tend to do so repeatedly. Other stores' customers are as likely to buy from you in the future as your own customers are if you're the one who's staying in touch. Wouldn't you love to have a copy of your competitors' mailing lists? Then hold on to the names of people you know are on it!

Last Christmas, this customer whisperer sold two \$70,000 Steinway grands to people who had chosen to do business with the seller of a well-known Japanese brand a few years ago. I could have gotten mad or hurt and written them off. Instead, I remained calm and kept them in the follow-up system. One responded to my direct-mail piece, and the other was referred by a teacher. It paid off.

A key element to a successful sales career is disciplined follow up. The keys to follow up are the acquisition and management of data and persistence in execution. So put down this magazine and pick up the phone. Make 25 calls today. Send out five notes and 10 e-mails. The customer whisperer promises something good will happen. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Bonita Springs, Fla. He welcomes questions and comments at greg@steinwaynaples.com.

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