The Four Elements of the Appointment Setting Process We Can Improve

What are they and how do we improve them?

An Excerpt from the upcoming book, *Contrary to Popular Opinion—Cold Calling Does Work!*
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A lot of us are what we like to call, *Hooked on Hopium*, when it comes to the success of our prospect acquisition strategy. Many of us concentrate most of our energy and focus on pursuing prospects that are already in the pipeline. After all, that's how we get paid, right? We don't get commissions for finding prospects; we get paid to close them. Our teams are good at closing, but suck (technical selling term) at consistently filling the pipeline with quality prospects.

This is a four-part article that focuses on the four main elements of a prospect acquisition process and how to move the needle in a positive direction on each. The four parts are:

1. Target Acquisition (who we call)
2. Art Skills (what do we say and how and when do we say it)
3. Best Practices (process and messaging)
4. Science Skills (efficiency and improvement)

Part 1 – Target Acquisition

This may be truly one of real elephants in the room issues. Every sales manager and sales professional thinks about this. The question is whether they really think it through or not.

We hear a very consistent message when talking to both these groups. Sales professionals just want to be handed a list of targets to be called. Sales managers want them to go find their own. As soon as the sales professional has a list, the sales manager is relieved and goes back to more important duties such as forecasting for the boss or trying to help someone close a deal. In other words, the objective incongruously seems to be the procurement of the list, not the ultimate goal of acquiring as many good new targets as we can so that our selling process is more effective and efficient.

Here's what we're missing and why it is so important. This may be the most critical component of the process of getting in front of prospective new customers. Why do I say that?

1. Every other step in the selling process stems from the success of this step. Each of us is given the same number of hours each year to accomplish our task of bringing home some amount of new revenue and new customers. If we invest that time wisely calling on a set of well qualified targets, we'll do well. Invest it poorly on a list of targets that are too small, outside our range of profitability, don't use our solution, etc. and we will fail unless we get lucky.

2. What good are great skills at getting through and converting conversations into appointments if our list doesn't contain targets that are of the right size for instance? Not only do we waste time trying to set the appointments, but we also waste even more time once in front of the target qualifying them. And if our qualification skills are poor, we'll waste even more time trying to sell to them and service them after the sale.

3. What good did the time we invested to create a good set of the Best Practices do us if we cannot leverage our prospecting time each day by building our territory with targets that are truly qualified, but just may not be in the market right now? A well thought out set of Best Practices applied to this concept will reduce the amount of cold calling we must do over time because these same targets remain on the list until they are in the market. I begin establishing credibility and, at least, a Dialogue Bond, each time I speak with them. However, if I constantly must start all over with a new list, I am doing neither.

What good does it do us to simply be efficient or fast at reaching out to the wrong targets? None. We're just failing faster.

The moral of the story is that, particularly as managers, we need to give great thought to, and invest the appropriate time in, helping our sales professionals acquire a good set of targets. We should ask ourselves what kind of lead generation programs are in play? How well are they working? Should we canvas? If we purchase lists, have we designed the criteria well enough?

Trust me—it will pay us back in spades, even if the current sales professionals can't cut the mustard. At least we're continuing to warm up the territory over time.

Part 2 – Art Skills

We just began asking participants who register for our webinars the question of which of these four categories of challenges pose the greatest challenge for them. The answer was overwhelmingly, number two: Art Skills. Most sales professionals just don't know what to say to open the conversation, let alone what to say when the target says, "No."

There's not a whole lot I can do to help fix this challenge in a single article. However, I can help you identify whether it is something we, as managers, need to address. Here's what I would suggest:

1. Invest in Klpz as a process engine for telephone prospecting because it will (among other really neat things), automatically provide two key ratios to determine whether our charges are struggling with Art.

    a. The first ratio is the Conversation Ratio—how many dials does it take to produce a conversation with the decision maker our sales professional wishes to meet with. In addition to this being a list problem, a low ratio here suggests that we should test how well our charges are leaving voice mails, sending coordinated e-mails and how well they handle gatekeepers.
    b. The second ratio is the Appointment Ratio—how many conversations does it take to produce an appointment. A low ratio here has only one principle root cause—what they say, when they say it, and how they say it once they are speaking with the person with whom they wish to meet. The list could also contribute to a low ratio here, although it generally has manifested itself as a problem before getting to this point.

2. Okay, maybe number 1 is a bit self-serving, but it really does work. So let's try this if we're unwilling or unable to do step 1. Let's ask our charges to begin writing down the results of their appointment-setting process. If not using Klpz, first have them record the time they begin and end making a Call Block. Then have them make a tick mark each time they:

    a. Dial the phone (D);
    b. Complete a conversation with the person they wish to meet with (CC);

c. Leave a voice mail (LVM);
d. Get a returned voice mail (RVM); and
e. Schedule an Initial Appointment (IA)

Trust me, it won't be exactly accurate, but it will begin to paint a very valuable picture. We'll begin to see patterns and gain insight into the process we've not had before. For instance, we'll begin to see things like they are not making as many dials as they say they are because the time they say they are making calls doesn't match up with what we know they are doing with their days. (By the way, figure on at least 6 minutes a dial if they use a CRM or contact manager; more if they are using spreadsheets or hand written lists. We've benchmarked it.)

3. In the next sales meeting, ask the team what is the number one negative response they are hearing when they get the decision maker on the phone. Then role-play how they are handling it. And by the way, the lower the Appointment Ratio, the more we need to be prepared to cringe when we hear what they are saying.

4. In a subsequent sales meetings ask them to role-play:

   a. Leaving voice mails
   b. Handling gatekeepers

5. If feeling overwhelmed at the result–call us. Our typical customer will double or better the number of appointments their teams set.

Okay, sorry for the second commercial in this article, but the point is if you will do at least steps 2 through 4, you'll have a really good idea of whether or not Art is something you need to address.

Part 3 – Best Practices

The concept of Best Practices contains a lot of different disciplines that apply to both Art (effectiveness) and Science (efficiency), but let me address at least a few key ones:

1. Are we managing our particular area of responsibility with the concept of territory management in mind? In other words, regardless of who is in a specific territory (virtual or geographic), are we employing a process that will leave the territory better defined and warmer a year from now regardless of whether our current sales professional is still here?

2. Do we have a Best Practice that defines the number of times a target will be called, how frequently, and if no contact is made, how long will we wait to begin the Cycle again?

3. Do we have our team professionally disengage at the end of a call, asking for permission to check back again in the future if the target is not in the market right now, or do they take the no they hear as a never?

4. Do we have our team leave voice mails? Are they different for each attempt in the Cycle? It is a great way to leave a commercial message if it is crafted well. And who knows, if the messages are different, sometimes we actually do hit on a hot button by varying our value proposition between several of our strongest.

5. Are we letting the target know that the last attempt *is* the last attempt for a while? In other words, are we giving the target a last chance to respond if they want to but were too busy to call back earlier?

6. How do we on-board new sales professionals? How do we provide them with the Best Practices that are working for our current team?

7. Can we tell within the first thirty to forty-five days whether our new team member has the aptitude and attitude to succeed or do we wait for the revenue attainment (or lack thereof) to tell us that several months down the road?

There are actually a lot more questions I could ask here that we step our customers through to determine how best to tackle this key part of the selling process, but any more at this time I'd either bore you or depress you!

Part 4 – Science

Science is all about speed, organization and reporting on the ability to pursue targets using the prescribed set of Best Practices so we can manage the process.

Our Creator has given all of us the same number of hours each week to attain our goals. In the world of telephone prospecting that is usually stated in terms of the fact that each of us has only so many dials in us each year. How we expend those dials is directly proportional to our success. For instance, the product for this process I recommend, Klpz, was designed specifically for this task. Therefore, our benchmarks show (and our customers report) that a caller can easily double the number of dials being made per hour of calling. So, if we can either increase the number of attempts being made without increasing the time commitment, or make the same number of attempts in half the time, should we not sell more?

Those that do take the time to design and institute a set of well thought out Best Practices generally would like for their charges to be able to follow those Best Practices accurately. Science is the way that is enforced.

How many times have we (or any of our charges), forgotten to call someone back when they requested we do? Unless we are super heroes, the answer is probably fairly often, but absolutely occasionally. It's why organizations invest a lot of money in CRM applications, contact managers and the like thinking they will solve this problem. Unfortunately, they weren't designed with the prospecting process in mind.

Lastly, science helps us improve the process by measuring the results and doing so in a way that we are provided the necessary, and *accurate*, data in a meaningful way (information).

For us sales managers, we tend to think we have quantified our entire area of responsibility. We run everything by the numbers, we say. However, we're wrong. We're only running have of our operation by the numbers. We've grown so accustom to not having any credible information to manage the front half of the selling process with, we don't even ever think about it. It's just the proverbial *black box*. We only know what goes in (dials) and what comes out (appointments).

The bottom line is this: it takes an understanding and implementation of all four elements to build a successful prospecting process.

If you're like most sales managers and your team does fine once they're in front of a prospect, but they're just not getting in front of enough of those prospects, give us a call. It's all we think about.

Caponi Performance Group, Inc., along with Contact Science, LLC, provides a holistic solution to Appointment Making by providing a proven methodology that addresses both the effectiveness and efficiency of the process. Visit us at http://www.coldcalling101.com, http://contactscience.com, and at http://www.caponipg.com.