

The Art, Skill and Value of the 'Next Calendar Event'

By

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If you are a sales manager, how often have you heard someone on your sales team talk about this 'great prospect' they've got, but when pressed for details have no concrete next step in the buying process? And then how often do those 'great prospects' wind up dropping by the wayside? Or you might hear a pretty good explanation of the next step, but it is only the logical next step in YOUR selling process, not the prospect's buying process or cycle. (There is a difference.) In other words, when you ask your rep what the next step is, they'll tell you, "It's getting them a quote", or "Setting up a demo". What you're not hearing is that the prospect has committed to that next step, and in concrete terms – a date, a time, and a place; complete with objectives for that step along with any resources necessary for the completion of that step. We call that the 'Next Calendar Event' or NCE for short.

In selling, a 'Next Calendar Event' is tangible evidence that someone is working with you, or as we like to say, is fully engaged with you. It's not a 'gut feeling' that the person is interested in moving forward with you, but PROOF of that interest. And measuring the presence of a NCE by the way will increase your forecasting accuracy immensely.

At CPG, we believe that interest is demonstrated by action. That action takes the form of an agreement to meet with you, speak with you, or do something for you (or with you) on a specific date and time...typically within a couple of weeks or within the time period that is consistent for your selling environment. This is the 'Next Calendar Event'. And as a matter of fact, we don't consider this person to even be a 'prospect' in our Tactical Opportunity Management system, unless we've got a 'Next Calendar Event' scheduled within that normal time period.

So why do we think this is so important? Here are seven reasons to ask for the 'Next Calendar Event':

1. **Shorten Buying Cycles**

At the end of a sales call, many salespeople say, "I'll call you next week to follow up." They end up easily adding an extra week or two to the buying cycle playing phone tag. Why not set that 'Next Calendar Event' while you're still face-to-face? In long buying cycles you can save yourself weeks, not to mention the time you'll save during the day playing the frustrating game of 'phone tag'. That means that you need to know what you'll be asking for as



the 'Next Calendar Event' before you leave for the meeting or pick up the phone. And if you need someone else's involvement (from within your own organization) in that 'Next Calendar Event', make sure you get a couple of possible times from them beforehand. Trying to 'triangulate' when only two are present is problematic at best, so make sure you take this into account while planning your sales calls. Don't 'wing it'.

One last thing on shortening buying cycles – remember, every product or service has a 'normal' buying cycle. Run past that time line and the odds of closing that deal start to drop precipitously. Believe it, people buy on emotion. Once you lose that early excitement and interest and the emotion starts to wane, your odds of success really decrease. And all that work you put into the cycle up to that point is basically lost. Don't let that happen to you any more than necessary.

2. Test Their Commitment

When you ask for the 'Next Calendar Event' and you start to hear the equivocating, what have you learned? Maybe they are not really going to buy, right? Many times we can pinpoint when we actually heard the 'No' when doing the postmortem, can't we? But even then it wasn't a, "No thanks." It was when they stopped returning phone calls, or emails that was the real clue. If we ask while we're face-to-face, at least we have the opportunity to test their commitment. They are the ones who really control the situation, so don't be afraid to hear 'No'. Just make sure you ask the right questions to make sure it truly should be a 'No' and it's not just a misconception. If they are really saying no, that is a good thing. You've just opened up time on your calendar to invest more profitably elsewhere. Time is a gift. Don't waste it on those who are embarrassed or too polite to tell you they're not going to buy.

Testing their commitment also has another concrete benefit to you and that is a more reliable and accurate forecast. If there is no NCE, don't let your reps forecast the opportunity. (Keep it on the pipeline, but not on the forecast.) The granular accuracy (WHICH opportunities will close) will increase dramatically.

3. Territory Management

Once you know you are meeting again with this client, you can set another appointment in the area or you can work in ADVANCE to set up other meetings in the area and fit this one into that pattern. Also, an ongoing prospect is more likely to meet with you in those hard to fill time slots as well, leaving the more attractive ones for those initial meetings.



4. Time Management

In addition to the fact of life that not all people will buy from us, is that the proposal that's due 'sometime next week' will probably slip to the bottom of your priority list. The proposal that's due because of a meeting you've got scheduled for next Tuesday at 2:00 will be less likely to slip. Find out exactly when it's DUE as soon as possible so you know when to DO it. Why? Because there are four things you should always make a conscious effort to schedule; meetings with prospects, work you have to do BEFORE and AFTER a meeting with a prospect, and prospecting time.

5. You'll be better able to Prioritize with Whom to Follow Up

Let's say you have twenty initial meetings in a busy month. Say that seven of them don't go anywhere – you get a clear NO or the person is obviously unqualified. If you're not asking for a 'Next Calendar Event' at the end of the initial meeting that means thirteen people are in "call-me-next-week-sometime" mode. Suppose you've only got time for five quality proposals this month. Upon which opportunity do you focus? Well, if you regularly ask for a 'Next Calendar Event', you'll know EXACTLY who you should be writing proposals for, because they are the people who are agreeing to move forward with you. Their interest is demonstrated by action. The others, when asked, didn't agree to see you. So here's the question: If they didn't agree to SEE you again, what makes you think they'll BUY from you?

6. You're Sending the Right Message

Your time is valuable, too. Consider this: We teach people how to buy from us based on how we act and what we say. So when we do ask for the "Next Calendar Event", we don't want to say, "When are you free?", but rather, "I've got a slot open at 11:00 on Wednesday. Are you free then?" Let them know you respect your time as well as theirs. My clients know I'll be asking for the 'Next Calendar Event' at the end of every meeting. Not only are they ready with their calendars when we sit down, but most of them ask me before I ask them! It makes sense to them too.

7. You Worked too Hard to Set Up the Initial Meeting in the First Place

You've made a sizable time investment to get to this point, drive out, and meet with this person. Why walk away from that without a commitment if you truly think you can help them improve how and what they do?



Conclusion

Put this in practice and I promise it will help you uncover the prospects that are really suspects much earlier in the buying cycle. This action alone will free up your time to work on the 'real' prospects or find new ones. It will also shorten your buying cycles. Both of those improvements will increase your closing ratios, not to mention the increase in the accuracy of your forecasts. So here's the rule. Write this down and look at it every day until it is engrained into your very being: Don't ever hang up the phone, or leave a meeting without getting a commitment for the 'Next Calendar Event'.

If you're interested, we've got a document providing some different suggestions as to how to ask for a 'Next Calendar Event' in fifteen different types of situations. If you're interested, [click here](#) and fill out the form and we'll send it to you.

