

## **Why You Must Assume - Even Though You've Been Told It's Something You Should Never Do**

Don't get me wrong! I love being a consultative seller. It's literally a part of my sales DNA. But a few years ago, I discovered that **"being consultative" didn't convince decision makers that it was worth their valuable time to meet with me.**

To show you what I mean, let me take you into their world and put you center stage as the designated future customer.

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You're busy working at your desk - and have been since 7 a.m. this morning. The phone rings. You glance at the clock and see that it's 2:57 p.m. You can't believe that it's so late already. Your "to do" list is longer now that it was when you started.

But you're expecting a very important call at the top of the hour so, without even a glance at the originating number, you pick it up.

"Hello," you say.

"Pat," the voice on the other end of the phone answers. "This is Terry. I'm the account executive from Global Solutions. I'm glad to finally catch you in. Do you have a few minutes?"

You shudder. You'd have never answered the phone if you thought you'd end up talking to a salesperson. "I'm expecting a call at 3 p.m." you reply tersely, hoping to shake yourself free from this unexpected interruption.

"Not to worry," says the voice. "I'll be brief. As I said, I'm from Global Solutions. We specialize in state-of-the-art services to help companies like yours with all your solution needs. I'd like to set up a time to meet with you to find out how you're handling your needs in this area - and share with you how Global might be able to help you out. I'm wondering how your schedule looks next Thursday?"

"You've got to kidding!" you blurt out. "You expect me to take my precious time to meet with you and tell you how we're doing things here? I've been slaving at my desk since bright and early this morning without even a break for lunch.

"Yet you have the audacity to request a meeting with me when you can't even give me a valid business reason for doing so?"

The voice jumps in, "Pat, I would never assume to know your needs. Every business is different. And I couldn't possibly recommend anything without learning more about your goals this year and how you're currently handling things.

"Plus, I'd like to understand these problems you're facing, as well as their impact on your organization. It would be presumptuous of me of me to assume."

"And," you butt in, "You'd don't think it's presumptuous to request a meeting with me when you haven't even taken time to learn about my company. Sorry, that just doesn't work with me. If I meet with you, you better bring something to the table."

The voice on the other end stammers, "I would never want to assume anything."

"You just don't get it!" you say emphatically as you slam down the phone, disgusted with another so-called 'consultative salesperson.' As far as you're concerned, all they're doing is wasting your valuable time without offering anything in return.

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What just happened here? **It's the end of a consultative sales era as we know it.**

Prospective customers simply don't have time for it today.

Instead, they need you to be assumptive! That's right. You need to assume - even though you were trained that to do so was to make an ASS-out-of-U-and-ME.

**In short, you need to demonstrate expertise right up front in order to earn the right to be consultative.**

So how should you approach a prospective customer? How about something like this:

"Pat. Terry from Global Sales. I know how much the economy is having an impact on manufacturing companies like yours. What we've found is that way too many organizations are paying way too much on their software licenses.

"We've been able to trim their expenses by up to 22.7% in the first year. If you're like other CFOs, you're looking for dollars everywhere in your budget. Let's set up a time to see how we can cut your costs in this area. Sound good?"

Feels completely different, right? You'll get appointments - not brush-offs - when you start assuming.

**To be effective in today's crazy business environment, you need to be assumptive to demonstrate your value.** Yes, you have to spend time doing research up front. Yes, you need to craft a personalized message.

But that's what it takes to get in the door. And after that, you can put your consultative sales skills to good use.

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## Reviving Prospects Who Disappear into the Black Hole

Have you ever had hot prospects who suddenly stopped returning your call? Then you know how disconcerting it can be - especially when they'd expressed so much interest in your product or service only days before.

At first, you assume their lack of responsiveness is an isolated situation that will quickly self-correct. But after repeated failed attempts to connect, you start to question your own sanity.

You could have sworn they were interested, but their current behavior indicates otherwise. And, not wanting to appear too desperate or to come across as a real pest, you're stymied in terms of what your next steps should be.

### Why They Disappeared

As a seller, it's always important to analyze what may be causing this behavior before taking action. In my experience, these are the typical reasons why prospects disappear into "The Black Hole."

- **They're totally swamped.** Without a doubt, this is the most common. In virtually every company today, people have way too much to do and not nearly enough time to get it all done. They fully intend to continue the conversation, but not right now.
- **Priorities changed.** This can happen overnight. Changing market conditions, bad 3rd quarter results, and new leadership are just a few of the possible root causes. But when this happens, it's darn near impossible to regain your momentum in the short term.
- **Lack of urgency.** Sometimes sellers confuse a prospect's interest level with a desire to take action today. As such, they share all the glorious details about their offering instead of building a business case for immediate change.
- **Column fodder.** Occasionally prospects just need comparative bids/pricing to justify their decision to go with another company.
- **They know everything.** When prospects feel they have all the information they need, there's literally no reason to talk with you any further.

Different reasons call for different actions. Some you can prevent by doing things differently in your customer interactions. Always be open to this possibility since prevention is your best cure. Others you have no control over.

In any case, you need answers! Is it "yeah" or "nay"? Are they still interested or not? Should you keep pursuing them or find new prospects?

## What You Can Do

When you don't know what's behind their silence, figuring out how to respond can be a dilemma - especially since you don't want to be a pest. Here are some strategies you can use in dealing with "The Black Hole:"

- **Just keep trying.** Realize that prospects expect you to carry the "keep in touch" burden - so do it. It can often take 8-10 contacts before you actually reach them again. Don't panic. This is normal in today's business environment.
- **Make each connection valuable.** Don't just say, "Hi Eric. Just getting back to you as I promised about your xxx decision. If you have any questions, give me a call.

Instead, you might say, "Eric, Based on our conversation last week, I know how important it is to you to shorten your sales cycle. There's a white paper on our website that addresses this issue. I'll be sending you a link via email shortly."

- **Have a sense of humor.** After 4-5 contacts, leave a funny message such as, "Eric. I know you're swamped. But I also know that shortening your sales cycle is important to you. That's why I keep bugging you. I'm looking forward to FINALLY reconnecting."
- **Leverage a variety of mediums.** Mix up phone calls with emails, mailings, invitations to upcoming events, sending articles, etc. To position yourself as a resource, makes sure each connection educates, informs or adds insights.
- **Create multiple entry points.** Never let one person be your total gateway to a company. Identify and nurture multiple relationships concurrently. When appropriate, reference others you're talking to in your messages/emails.
- **Re-evaluate your initial connection.** How could you increase their urgency? Determine if you're just column fodder? Or, tie your offering more into their business priorities? In way too many cases, sellers have done a product/service dump when talking to prospects. Instead you need to on critical business outcomes and the difference you can make.
- **Plan your next step now.** Never leave a meeting without a homework assignment (for you and/customer) and a firm follow-up appointment scheduled. If they're unwilling to do this, it's an indicator that something may not be quite right - which should prompt you to explore their need and urgency in greater depth.
- **Let them off the hook.** Send an email stating that you thought they were interested, but perhaps you misjudged the situation since you haven't heard back

from them in the last 6 weeks. Believe it or not, this strategy often gets a response & an explanation from a prospect who is feeling guilty about not reconnecting.

- **Reduce your contact frequency.** If, after ten touches, you still haven't heard, start contacting them less often. A quarterly schedule might be more appropriate. Or, you might want to keep on top of what's happening in the account and reconnect at a more appropriate time.

By leveraging one or more of these strategies, you'll often be able to re-engage a prospect who has disappeared into "The Black Hole." Not always, but often. And, if you've continually provided value and focused on the impact your offering makes, they'll likely be ready to implement your solution yesterday.

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## Are You Losing Them at Hello?

In the movie Jerry Maguire, when Tom Cruise is in the midst of his proposal to Dorothy, she stops him with, "You had me at hello." Every seller dreams of hearing those exact same words when they approach corporate decision makers.

**Unfortunately, the opposite usually occurs.** Instead of capturing their prospect's attention, most sellers create resistance with their opening remarks and blow the opportunity.

Why do bad things like that happen to good people?

In short, weak value propositions.

**If you're running into trouble cracking into corporate accounts,** most likely the root cause is your failure to clearly articulate the business outcomes that customers realize from using your products, services or solutions.

A couple weeks ago, I did a new exercise while training a group of sellers. In small groups, they rated common value propositions that sellers could use when prospecting for new customers.

Using a 1-10 (tops) scale, they evaluated value propositions such as these on their effectiveness in initiating change from the status quo:

\_\_\_ We offer one-stop shopping for all your (fill in the blank) needs.

\_\_\_ We're the industry leader in (fill in the blank) and have been recognized for our exceptional (fill in the blank).

\_\_\_ We specialize in ( fill in the blank) and work with well-known clients such as Microsoft, Best Buy and Kraft.

After serious discussion amongst the sellers, these value propositions received scores between 4-6. Their rationale? They were nice benefit statements about the company, but not quite as punchy as they could have been.

Since my book, *Selling to Big Companies*, was required reading prior to the session, I assumed these sellers would ace this exercise. Not so! In fact, they were way off.

The truth is that all the above value propositions really deserve a score of one. Not four. Not six. Just a measly score of one.

"C'mon, Jill," you might be saying. "How can that be? They're not horrible statements. They're nice."

Yes, they are nice. I'll give you that. But they're grossly ineffective and that's why they rated so poorly.

## Capturing the Decision Maker's Attention

While those commonly used value propositions listed above might be important at some point in the decision process, they're totally and utterly worthless when prospecting.

When it comes to capturing a decision maker's attention, here's what you need to think about:

- **Strong value propositions pique curiosity and entice.** When prospects hear them, they want to learn more.
- **Strong value propositions create a stark contrast from the status quo.** When prospects hear them, they're willing to consider making a change.

Consider this: If you were on the other end of the phone and a seller called with this message, what would your impression be?

"Eric. Jill Konrath calling from Selling to Big Companies. We offer one-stop shopping for all your sales training needs - everything from lead generation to closing. We use state-of-the-art methodologies to ensure our training sticks."

Does it entice you? Not one iota. Does it get you to consider switching sales training vendors? Not likely. Does it make you want to invest lots of money that's currently allocated elsewhere? Not on your life.

**Statements about your company and what it does are NOT value propositions.** Period. They are not value propositions.

If you want to get decision makers "at hello", you need to clearly articulate the results the customers can expect from using your product, service or solution. That's results, spelled R-E-S-U-L-T-S.

For example, a few months ago I trained the national accounts team of a well-known media company. All sellers identified one large corporate client with whom they wanted to set up a meeting.

**As a result of the workshop, 87% of the sales force landed an appointment with their targeted account.**

Those outcomes are unheard of in my business. Virtually every Vice President of Sales will want to learn more.

That's the power of a strong value proposition. Even decision makers who weren't considering a change will think it's worth their time to find out about the sellers offering.

If you really want to "get them at hello," then make sure you:

**Talk results.**

Decision makers don't care about your products or services. They only care about the results they'll see. Stress that and you'll catch their attention. Omit those results and you've lost them.

**Get real.**

Refer to actual client successes and include measures or statistics. Success stories from other companies in their industry are especially compelling. By giving specific examples, you really pique their curiosity.

**Test your message.**

After you've planned what to say, ask, "If I were the decision maker, would this message entice me? Would it make me want to spend an hour of my valuable time with this person?"

If your answer isn't a resounding yes, rework and revise your message till it is enticing. Don't leave it to chance. Don't hope that it will work. Your job is to make it so compelling that your decision makers "get it at hello."

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## Why "Embracing Rejection" is Stupid

Every once in a while, I read something that a so-called sales expert says that really ticks me off. The other night it happened again. I was doing a quick scan of the latest issue of a popular magazine when suddenly I came across a whole slew of idiocy in just one article.

Here's just a taste of this lunacy ...

"In sales, the results are in the rejections."

"Every time a contact results in a rejection, your salespeople can view the rejection as making money."

"The secret is for each salesperson to realize how much rejection is necessary for success."

"Sales managers must coach their teams to embrace rejection."

**This is the stupidest advice you could ever get.** Think about it. Can you ever imagine yourself saying this:

"Hallelujah! I've made 66 calls today and actually connected with 24 people. But of that number, 23 of them were total failures. Those decision makers blew me off as fast as they could. But one person asked me to send a brochure, so it was really a great day. With all those rejections, I'm well on my way to success."

Let me tell you why it's even stupider than you might think.

Guess what happens if you embrace rejection as a part of the job and quickly move on to make the next call. You're doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over.

What do I recommend? In my opinion, a rejection is a failure. It's a sales call that did not result in a desirable outcome. If you want to get better at selling, it is imperative to analyze your failures to determine if a different approach could have yielded a better outcome.

There is NO other way to improve in this profession.

To be successful, you must take a serious look at all aspects of the interaction that were within your control. This includes:

- Your word choices.
- How you positioned your company.
- The sequence of what you said.
- How much you said: too little, too much.
- Your tone, pace and sound.

Each one of these can be changed and potentially yield an improved outcome. So where do you start? I suggest you pay close attention to: ❖?❖❖?❖

**The specific obstacles you encounter. ❖?❖**

What are your prospects saying: too high price, too expensive, currently satisfied? All these are indicators that you need to rethink your approach.

**When you encounter these obstacles. ❖?❖**

Take a look at what you said just prior to hearing the objection. Most likely the words preceding the client's comments are key offenders.

The key point is that rejection is data. Simply data. It can be analyzed to determine trends, frequency, and even specific sales behaviors. When you think about it this way, you can experiment with various approaches.

You can simulate conditions by listening to your phone calls from your buyer's perspective. You can get input from colleagues to see if what you say would sound interesting if they were your prospect. You can check with other sellers to see what strategies they use.

Stop listening to those sales gurus who tell you to "embrace rejection." They're spouting old-style selling techniques that won't get you in the door of major corporations. They don't have a clue what it takes to succeed in today's marketplace.

Get smart and start analyzing your rejection. Look at it as a puzzle that needs solving. You may not know what it takes right now to crack into those corporate accounts, but you certainly have the ability to figure it out.

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## Don't Blow It When Your Prospect Answers the Phone

The use of voicemail has become so pervasive these past few years that sometimes you wonder if you'll ever talk to another human being again.

Frustrating as it may be, over time you begin to accept it as the new norm. You expect to get voicemail and in a perverse sort of way may even relish it. It enables you to make that check on your "to do" list, showing you tried to get in but once again had no luck.

And admit it ... leaving a message is a whole lot easier than talking to a person who says they have no need, throws objections in your path or slams the phone down on you.

In fact, the prevalence of voicemail can lull you into a sense of complacency. So much so, that you're entirely unprepared for that rare moment in time when your prospect absent-mindedly picks up the phone.

Mind you, they would never answer it if they thought a seller was on the other end of the line. They're likely right in the middle of a meeting and expecting a call from someone else.

Suddenly, instead of leaving your well-prepared voicemail message, you're on the spot to say something intelligent and compelling. If you're like most people, those kind of words don't flow naturally from your mouth - especially when you're under pressure.

When I was writing my book, one of my clients was actually working through it in real time, giving me immediate feedback on the strategies, processes and tips in it.

She had a great laugh at my expense when she read about my own major blooper when the vice president of sales actually answered the phone. I totally lost my cool.

My value proposition evaporated into thin air. I stumbled over my words, talked a mile a minute and blurted out this rambling, non-focused spiel about what my company did. It was horrible - totally unbecoming of someone in my position. In fact, I was embarrassed to be me.

I got off the phone as soon as I could before I dug myself into an even deeper hole. My only saving grace was that he probably wouldn't remember who I was.

Alyssa thought that was really, really funny - that is, until the day it happened to her. She'd prepared this great voicemail script for a prospect with whom she was trying to get an appointment.

She was all set to leave her message at the beep, but it never came. Instead, Mr. Big answered the phone. Immediately Alyssa felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her brain locked and she couldn't think of a thing to say.

On the other end of the line, Mr. Big was saying, "Hello, hello. Is somebody there?"

"Yes," she finally said. "This is Alyssa. I'm with Anonymous Software Firm."

"What do you want?" he said curtly.

"We specialize in (self-serving words to describe her offering). I'd like to talk with you about your sales automation system and how our software can help you improve it."

He cut her short. "We already have that covered. I'm in the middle of a meeting and have to go."

End of call. He hung up.

So what will you say after your prospect says, "Hello?" Have you thought of it? Does it flow out of your mouth as easily as your voicemail? Or, are you getting ready to dig your own grave?

Here are several tips that will help you avoid sounding like a blooming idiot.

- 1. Keep it simple.** After you say your name, it helps if the next sentence you say is the same for both your voicemail and an actual conversation. That way your brain won't freeze.
- 2. Focus on business.** Corporate decision makers hate peppy, enthusiastic people who can't wait to share things about their product or service.
- 3. Develop a provocative question.** You want to engage the decision maker in conversation as quickly as you can.
- 4. Check to see if they're busy right then and there.** If they're distracted, you're wasting your breath.
- 5. Don't focus on being nice.** Instead, focus on being a business professional that has something valuable to say.

Most of all, plan ahead. You know how seldom someone actually picks up their phone. This is the opportunity you've been waiting for. Make sure you put your best foot forward.

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