

by Linda Richardson

# Prospecting: Getting Through Voice Mail

Reaching a prospect is no easy feat. One salesperson experienced a voice mail obstacle that was more daunting for him than most. Here is the voice mail message: "If you are calling to sell me X, don't hold your breath for a return call."

When the salesperson described this to me I was intrigued - so I called and asked the prospect to call me back because I wanted the opportunity to interview him about his message. When I called the voice mail I not only heard his message but got insight into his approach by the delivery of his message. The prospect was positive, energetic, and sounded nice. I was pretty certain he'd call me back - and this CTO of a major retail chain did.

Here's what I learned from him:

Linda: What motivated your creating this message?

Client: I was getting too many voice messages a day to sell X to me - that's 10 to 15 a week and I didn't have time to call them back. I used to just delete them but I felt bad. They could have been our customers.

Linda: What kind of messages did you delete?

Client: As soon as I heard, "We are doing a lot in X, and I was wondering if I could speak to you for 15 to 20 minutes to learn about what you are doing and tell you how we could fit in. We just finished a project with \_\_\_\_\_ (often the same company was mentioned by everyone who called!)."

Linda: What didn't you like about that message?

Client: It offends me. We are doing a lot, and to think I could explain it in 15 to 20 minutes is an insult. And everybody says they are doing a project for the same few big companies.

Linda: Your message got my attention. How has your message worked in deterring salespeople who prospect you?

Client: In fact it does work. Yes! It's funny because I get a lot more hang-ups. Very

rarely does anyone leave a message and call back.

Linda: If you were the sales manager of the salespeople who prospect you, how would you feel about them not calling back and giving up so easily?

Client: Well, I'd want my people to spend time on hot prospects and not waste time on cold prospects, but I wouldn't want them to give up so easily. It's surprising.

Linda: Getting back to getting through to you, what kind of message would interest you?

Client: Oh, I don't think that I should give that secret away.

Linda: I know it is a precious secret. Why not?

Client: I'll get more calls than I do now!

Linda: I understand that. I won't tell our readers who you are, and we won't prospect you! To help our readers, what message would interest you?

Client: I need things that are problem specific so it's hard, but if it is something of interest, I would call back, ask for material and at least keep a resource file. I'm always open to consider a way for us to improve.

Linda: What kind of things would interest you?

Client: I am not interested in web design or the marketing stuff. I'm a technical person. I'm serious about good design and capacity for design and technical strength. I don't want to hear "We do a lot of work for X" if X has nothing to do with me. I want to hear about a company I relate to and to know I will get a bit more about the depth of the project. I want to know it was a major project, not some little thing to use a name. I also prefer to work with people close by. I look for good pricing. I like wonderful service.

**Prospecting in this market is very tough:** What can we learn from all of this to increase prospecting results?

- Prepare. The "dialing for dollars" mentality isn't very effective. Do homework on the company and person you are calling. Who is the person? What is his/her background? Use the web. Ask colleagues and his/her assistant for information on how long in the role, background, use of e-mail vs. voice mail, etc.
- Tailor your message. Use your preparation and experience.
- Keep your message very concise and focused.
- Refine your message - for example, rather than ask for the typical 15 to 20 minutes to learn what the client does, ask for a few minutes to understand the priority objective related to your capabilities so you can focus and determine how you might support those priorities.
- Pick your examples of clients carefully. Don't just say "We work with clients like \_\_\_\_\_," but say, "We have long-term, deep relationships with \_\_\_\_\_ (and choose a client(s) of interest to the prospect) in providing \_\_\_\_\_." (Of course do not disclose confidential information.)
- Prepare your benefits. This is tricky since you really don't know needs. But make an educated guess based on your homework and experience and hedge your bet by mentioning two, not one, benefits and strengths vs. just mentioning X from one perspective.
- Most of all be persistent - be creative. Just think how few people called this prospect back. This is giving up too early in my book. Remember this prospect has needs and almost no one trying to get through. When you get him or her on the phone, be ready to gain his/her interest, ask one or two questions to get at his/her priorities, needs, and questions, ask for your action step, and follow up, follow up, follow up. The best, most successful prospectors are prepared and persistent and make second, third, and... efforts.
- Of course try different times of day and different numbers. When you make a call in the a.m. don't leave a message and try again in an hour and leave another message. Use e-mail if you have the e-mail address or try to get it (use a letter to get in touch if all else fails) and do everything you can to get personal referrals to warm up otherwise cold (frigid) calls!