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HOW TO KEEP YOUR SALES FROM RUNNING

# out of gas

EDITORIAL | JOHN GRAHAM



## JOHN GRAHAM

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**Most of us have figured out that it's smart to have a least a few gallons of gas in the tank at all times.** And it's not very bright to see how far we can go before running out of gas. A couple of "come and get me" calls is usually all it takes before we get the message to head for the gas station before disaster strikes.

Nevertheless, far too many businesses somehow missed this memo. Every day they are running out of gas and don't know how to find their way to the nearest pump.

Now, if this seems somewhat obtuse, try this: *Salespeople find themselves trying to run on empty with no gas station within 50 miles. Worse yet, they can't find their way to the pump even with a GPS.*

The message here is utterly elementary: As salespeople, we let the good times deceive us. Because we were so successful, it didn't take much to convince ourselves that it would go on forever. But, as we all know, it didn't.

While all that's history, few, if any, salespeople and even fewer sales managers and business owners have anything that even resembles *Plan B*.

Here's where it gets really interesting: These same companies honestly believed their strong sales figures were the direct result of their prospecting prowess, when there was absolutely no connection. While some of the sales executives in several of these companies may now realize they were in error, others do not have a clue why their sales have continued to nosedive. They look everywhere except at their prospecting. Here's what went wrong:

*Because sales were good, they didn't bother analyzing their best customers so they could reach out and find more that fit the profile.* This is the "Huns coming over the mountain mistake." The hordes of customers kept coming, whether consumers or B-2-B buyers.

*They couldn't see the need for an ongoing program to identify and cultivate new prospects.* How many times have you heard a salesperson or a sales manager say, "You know, we really have more customers than we can handle"? That was a common attitude until quite recently. If that isn't enough, salespeople let it be known that they weren't hired to do "scut work," a term that can be translated as performing trivial, unrewarding, tedious, dirty and difficult chores.

*These are the same salespeople who talked endlessly about their "great relationships" with customers.* They really believed what they said, even though they didn't take

the time to understand the customer's business and they weren't there to give help when it was really needed.

*They saw a prospect as someone they could call today for an appointment tomorrow or next week.* They didn't see prospecting as a strategy for creating a continuing flow of new business. No matter how you cut it, they acted as if they were in charge. Now, they find themselves faced with customers and prospects that have taken the reins away from them.

The salespeople we're describing talked about sales and took pride in their success. Unfortunately, they were so blinded by their success that they failed to do what was needed to be successful once the sales tap was turned off.

They failed to implement the tactics that could continue their success.

They did little or nothing to pull more and more prospects into their orbit.

They failed to work at making sure their customers knew they had valuable knowledge and were not just selling something.

The more sales declined, the more their sales managers urged them to ask for referrals. Of course referrals are wonderful, but in a recession, no customer is thinking about anything other than survival, and referrals cannot be forced. They tend to fall into your lap when least expected.

Given an economic environment that's difficult and drags on and on, why do salespeople fail? The answer isn't that they have a negative attitude, don't work hard enough or give up too easily. It isn't because they aren't skilled in selling.

The problem is that they are asked to do something that customers not only don't want but also actually reject.

*More than anything else, customers do not want someone around who is trying to sell them something.* Americans, for example, have had a love affair with cars, yet they have stopped buying them. We have long had a negative savings

## THE MAIN TASK OF A BUSINESS IS TO CREATE CUSTOMERS, THOSE WHO MAKE A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO DO BUSINESS WITH YOU.

rate; yet, savings have gone from below zero to 5 percent almost overnight.

*Those who say, "The main task of a business is to make sales" are faced with a tough problem: it isn't working. Rather, from a marketing viewpoint, the main task of a business is to create customers, those who make a conscious decision to do business with you.*

Kraft Foods' free recipe "iFood," for the iPhone illustrates this "pulling the customer to you" process. It's an ingenious way to attract customers (not try to grab them) by offering easy and successful recipes, complete with shopping lists, shortcuts and even brief "instructional" videos that take the viewer through the cooking process.

Yes, the recipes call for certain Kraft Food products, but the results are so pleasing, the user can only have a good feeling about Kraft Food for the help they get. Instead of trying to get people to buy their products, Kraft uses a marketing tactic that pulls customers.

Trying to figure out gimmicks to "grab" customers is a waste of time, but never more so than in a recessionary period. Investing time and effort in helping people solve problems, make life more enjoyable and easier is the way to create customers today.

The same principle applies in B-to-B situations. Ed Testa, the vice president of sales for Boston-based Greystone Equipment Finance Corporation, specializes in the graphic arts industry, where he has practiced the art of pulling customers closer for more than 20 years.

Although he has never taken a booth at a trade show, he maintains a demanding show schedule, and you'll always find him working a customer's booth. "You have to support them," says Ed. "By being there, I can get acquainted with dealers who are buying equipment or will make a purchase in the future. They know we're here to help when they get ready."

This underscores the point of how salespeople can benefit from constantly pulling customers closer. After conducting a training program for a life insurance firm, the presenter made sure the names of the key people at the session were added to his company's database, since they made it a practice to stay in touch regularly.

Four years later, a principal of the insurance firm called to arrange a meeting. Changes had taken place and they

were ready to implement a full-blown marketing communication program.

Today, pulling is far more effective than attempts to grab customers and prospects. No one, no matter how competent, is smart enough to know when prospects are ready to buy. If that's true, then it's constant cultivation that creates sales.

This is why a prospecting strategy of building a database combined with constant cultivation is the way to pull customers closer and closer. When this happens, you'll be there when they get ready to make an inquiry, ask for information or place an order. ■