



Meeting face-to-face with prospects is still considered essential to the rep profession. For continued success, you must persist to forge solid customer relationships.



The Quest For Customer Face Time

BY JACK FOSTER

Ask a manufacturers' rep if it's a challenge to gain that face-to-face contact with customers that is so necessary, and chances are, you'll get a response similar to:

- "Is this a trick question?"
- "Sure it's a challenge, and it's one that gets more difficult every day."
- "It all comes down to relationships. If the customer knows you and depends upon you, you'll get in to see him. Not so much with new customers."

Those were some of the reactions ASM received from reps when the subject was raised about gaining personal, across-the-desk access to customers. Despite the challenges of getting those face-to-face meetings, reps remain focused on the job at hand.

For instance, consider the words of Jim Kalfaian, Target Component Sales, Guilford, Connecticut. "Sales remains a contact sport. Without access to the customer, the rep simply isn't in the game." He adds, "The easy part of what we do is [spending] time and effort with existing customers. The challenge remains getting your face in

front of new customers and prospects . . . because, for the most part, they don't know who you are. To overcome that barrier, the rep had better make sure he presents a compelling reason for the customer to meet with him. Having said that, however, this is hardly a situation to complain about. That's the way it has always been, and that's the way it's going to be. It will certainly never discourage me to the point where I'm not going to make sales calls again."

The task at hand for Kalfaian and other reps like him is to bust through any and all barriers. Kalfaian accomplishes that task by "doing fairly little blind prospecting. Basically, I pick my spots and attempt to go directly to the decision makers. When I do some cold calling, it's generally with a company I know and respect, [when I] know they have a need for something I'm selling.

"On the other hand, when I do call on a new company, I have my approach narrowed down to just one or two of my lines. That allows me to have a good idea about the reception I'm going to get even before I call them. I'll know beforehand whether there's a likely prospect, and if there is, I stay focused on that approach."

Kalfaian, just as the rest of us, cannot ignore the impact that social networking has had in our lives and our professions – and the life of the rep is no exception. For him, LinkedIn has become more useful than any of the other tools when it comes to communicating with customers, and "Twitter is not my cup of tea." While he admits he doesn't use LinkedIn very much, "It is somewhat useful for finding people in a company. If you know someone works at a particular company and you get to their profile, then you can find other people who view this profile. That can lead you to prospects."

Then there are good, old-fashioned personal contacts.

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According to Kalfaian, "While I find that gatherings such as local Chamber of Commerce meetings are too broad and don't provide me with access to customers, trade shows certainly remain valuable. Last month, for instance, we attended one to see and be seen, and it was worth our time and effort. It's always great to make that personal connection with people. You never know where it's going to take you."

Kalfaian, who has been a rep for six years, notes that getting in front of the customer is no more trying today than when he started. "I do find that people are a bit less likely to speak to you on the phone, but when I have something really substantive, they're open. In addition, I'm also getting more e-mails than phone calls than in the past."

Tim Marshall, Marshall & Assoc., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, points his finger firmly in the direction of a business "time crunch" to explain why it's so difficult to get in front of the customer. "We all recognize what's happened," he explains. "Our customers' staffs have been cut, and they're being forced to do more with less – just as we are."

Like the other reps interviewed for this article, Marshall points to voice mail, e-mail and protective secretaries as major barriers that must be overcome when beating a path to customers. Commenting on the latter, he notes, "If I ever worked for a company that had secretaries refuse to provide buyer's names, I'd take immediate corrective action. Isn't it the purchasing department's function to get the name out there so contact can be made?"

One way Marshall has overcome that challenge is by networking with other salesmen. "By checking with salesmen who call on a customer, we can generally get the names we need."

As a 16-year veteran rep, Marshall acknowledges that it's tougher to get face-to-face with the customer than ever before. "I'm not a copier salesman. I sell products our customers need on a regular basis. I recognize the walls are getting more difficult to climb. That's why we've got to be so persistent in all of our efforts."

While Wayne Carrig, Carrig-Tech Sales, Lake May, Florida, can count his blessings in that he knows just about all of his customer base very well, he still admits it's not always easy to get in to see them. "In my particular case," he explains, "I've got a relatively small customer base and I know all of them intimately. So when they tell me they don't need anything or there's no reason to come in and see them, I know they're being honest and that I'm not losing any business. Having said that, however, many times I'll . . . contact them anyway." Among the reasons he'll cite for staying in touch are to check that a previous problem has been suitably solved or simply to

send a note recapping a previous conversation. “I do all I can to keep my hat in the ring,” he says.

In addition to calling on purchasing, Carrig explains he also contacts engineering or materials management, but contacts are harder to come by now than ever before. “Part of it has to do with age, I think. The older customers still rely on catalogues and other printed material. The younger people are more satisfied with a link to a web site, a CD or a PDF of a product. That’s caused me to get up to speed with the latest in electronic communications.”

A combination of approaches works for Scott Hall. Hall, Industrial Product Solutions, Pittsford, New York, notes, “When I’m cold calling, I generally send an e-mail and follow up with a phone call referring to the e-mail. Then I toss the ball into their . . . court by telling them all I need is about 10 minutes of their time. If after that period of time, they don’t feel there’s any need to continue, I’ll depart. I’ll try approaching a new customer five or six times before I move on.”

When it comes to any person or thing that acts as a gatekeeper, blocking him from a customer, Hall doesn’t necessarily point to any of the traditional sources (e.g., secretaries, voice mail, etc.) Rather, it’s the availability of information via the Internet that keeps customers from him. “To be honest, the greatest barrier I face is the ability of the buyer to access information electronically. As a result, they go out, get their buying homework done on the Internet and are less inclined to make time for the rep.”

Hall continues that the presence of the Internet doesn’t keep him from maximizing any and all of his personal networking opportunities. “When I’m out and about I keep my eyes and ears open for any opportunities. I’ll never miss an opportunity to get someone’s contact information if I feel we could potentially conduct business



with each other.”

“Struggle, claw and persevere” are the words Paul Beattie, Metal Marketing South, Inc., Lake Wylie, South Carolina, uses to describe his efforts to arrive in front of his customers. “While my many years of experience, coupled with industry knowledge, can generally get me where I need to be with customers, I’ve got to admit that I haven’t been able to overcome the challenge of getting as much face time as I want. . . .”

Beattie acknowledges that various gatekeepers present challenges to getting in front of his prospects/customers, but he adds, “They’re paid to be gatekeepers. Some are quite good at it, but I don’t take it personally. Instead I make every effort to work with them.”

Beattie, who has been a rep since 1983, admits, "Today it's a whole new world when you factor in the progression of communicative tools that we now deal with. While it may be a challenge to get in front of the customer, on the positive side, even working alone in our respective offices, we're much more productive than we've ever been before in meeting the needs of both our customers and our principals. As a result, if we have the relationships, it may not be necessary to have as many sales meetings as we did in the past."

He adds that if customers have difficulty putting time aside to meet with reps, "We've got to keep in mind that they're dealing with the same time-constraint problems we are, and we all have to learn to deal with those problems."

Emphasizing the importance of relationships, Jim McHugh explains that he never has a problem getting in to see the customers he's worked with for years. "It's the prospects and new customers that are much more difficult." McHugh, TMR Assoc., LLC, Greenfield, Massachusetts, explains that a combination of voice and e-mails generally lets him know whether a customer is interested in seeing him.

McHugh, who's been a rep for a dozen years, notes that over that period of time he really hasn't noticed all that much of a change in his ability to get inside the customer's office. What he has experienced, however, is a bit of a change in the overall means used to communicate. "Where once I might have received 70% of my communication via telephone and just 30% e-mail, now those figures have been reversed to the point where it more like 80% e-mail to 20% phone calls."

Just as McHugh points to his ease in getting in to see established customers, Greg Canose, Award Marketing Services, Whitehouse, New Jersey, explains that getting in front of your customer comes down to developing relationships with them as best you can. "When you're talking about new customers, it all depends upon the needs of that customer and the reason he might have for agreeing to a meeting with you."

In general terms, however, Canose explains, "While



it's always a good idea to have the face-to-face meeting, having those meetings isn't necessarily as important today as it might have been in the past. That's because there are so many other means of communications (i.e., voicemail, e-mail) that you can use to get the job done."

A veteran rep of 35 years, Canose has even occasionally used texting as a communications tool with customers. "That's easy to learn how to do when you've got kids in the family. It works sometimes, and I've even heard of some customers who prefer it, but I've got to admit I don't do a great deal of it." ☒

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