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Sales Without Cold Calls: Always Be Selling, but Never Need to Sell

A business that treats every call, visit and discount as the sale never has to dial a stranger.

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Selling all the time, calling no one

Every contact between a business and a customer is a sale being made or lost, and the best businesses never place a sales call. A sale gets made when the phone is answered well and when the first visit offers more than a price. Neighbors repeating the company's name do the rest. A contractor who works that way can stay booked three months ahead on word of mouth and referrals, and that was the calendar for years at a consulting and construction contracting company I later sold.

Selling is the part of work I like least. I've sold computer systems, software and vacuums. I never made a dime at any of it, and none of those jobs lasted long. Treat each contact as the sale itself, though, and a separate pitch has nothing left to do.

The other way to sell

The usual way to sell by phone is the phone bank: a list of strangers, a script and a quota. The caller opens with a line written by someone else, pushes through the objections the script predicts and dials the next number when the call ends. Nothing in that routine resembles the way my calendar filled, with calls that came in and a person on the line who had a name and a company ready.

The call that opens with a question

Several times a week the phone rings, first on the company line and now on a personal one. A voice asks, "Is this Jason?" Two more sentences follow, both scripted. "We just finished a project in your neighborhood." "And we offer free estimates."

All three have a flaw. Take the first: it assumes the person who answered is the person the caller wanted, and it lands before the caller has said who is calling. Giving a name before asking for one is a basic courtesy in any sales conversation, and callers new to the script skip it more often than experienced ones.

Next comes a finished job at the nearest cross streets; callers often claim one, whether or not any work or company sign has ever stood there. A contractor who offers the homeowner a discount for a sign in the yard during the job and for two weeks after gets a claim that's true and that every neighbor can see. It costs a few yard signs.

Last comes the free estimate. Plenty of contractors give estimates free, so the offer promises little a homeowner couldn't already get.

A few of those callers got a lesson in return, one-on-one and on the spot.

What answering the phone looks like

Every incoming call got the same answer: a name and a company, said at once and then said again. Callers never had to ask who was on the line, and a name repeated that often sticks. It works in the other direction too. Opening with a name and a company already sells the one thing every call can sell, which is who's calling, and the line can go dead on the next breath without taking that away.

Visits replaced free estimates. The business came to the house and talked through every project the customer had in mind, then said plainly whether the customer needed advice or whether the company could do as many of the jobs as possible cheaper than anyone else and still make a profit.

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Advice sometimes turned into a job, from that customer or from someone they knew. Some customers handed over several projects at once, and their family and friends added more, months before any of the work began. Booked solid at least three months out, the calendar rested on word of mouth and referrals. As an executive, and in presales (the work before a sale), sales and post-sales (the work after it), I never made a sales call. I returned calls.

The first house, and the man who taught the trade

In 2005 a first home built in 1905, a hundred years old by then, turned into a gut remodel that outran one person's time. Sheetrock came first, done by the owner of a drywall and painting company, then the interior painting, then the exterior. A friendship formed, and a working relationship with it. Work went to him as a subcontractor, a business hired for part of a job, and later he was hired outright to take jobs the business couldn't handle. He was a humble man and my teacher in the trades, the first of several role models.

Over the years the work widened to plumbing, electrical, structural, framing, carpentry, HVAC (the heating and cooling systems), sewage and landscaping, and from bathroom and kitchen remodels up to ADUs, the accessory dwelling units that go up in a backyard or under a house, basements included. Technology drew the career back, which is where I'm happiest, with construction kept as a hobby. Today I run a non-profit that learns and builds in AI.

Taking one for the customer

Looking at every project had a cost, and the business paid it. Advice was free, and the yard-sign discount came out of the margin. Sometimes the business took one for the customer, absorbing the cost of a job so the customer stayed, because that customer's next projects, and their family's, were worth more than the one in hand.

Working across the trades shows where each cut comes out of the price of a remodel. A contractor who knows that can pass the savings on to the customer and still make a profit.

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The network was people first

My network on LinkedIn has helped, but not because of LinkedIn. Relationships behind each connection did the work. I hired one company, and only that company, for contract staff augmentation (hiring outside people on contract to fill roles on a team) and for contract projects, because of the relationship and the discount that came with it, and the firm charged nothing for my own placement, because it knew the relationship would bring business later.

Why it matters

A business that sells by dialing strangers pays for every call and every lead, and it has to earn that money back somewhere in the price. A business that sells in every contact spends the same money on the customer instead, in advice and in discounts, and the homeowner sees a lower price from someone who has already been straight about the work.

Two fixes cost almost nothing: a name given first and an offer to look at every project. Advice from someone whose calendar filled without a single dial is the one kind these callers don't take.

On every call the offer still stands. The line goes dead, and the name has been said anyway.

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// ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Newell leads organizations and people in technology, and is a researcher, deep technologist and builder — from a CRAY to agentic AI. He founded MAX Research Collective to build AI for regulated industries that runs where its owner has control, with healthcare as its strongest focus. About Jason → Connect on LinkedIn → ORCID →

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