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Got The Follow-Up Blues?

By Carolyn West Price

"We met some great prospects and potential referral sources at the expo, but then we came back to work…."

You and I know the rest of the story. Despite all the great intentions to follow-up with these contacts, the daily "to do" list gets in the way and the stack of business cards eventually ends up in the back of a desk drawer. As a result of not contacting these people (or not getting in touch beyond the first contact), revenue is lost, and you can't even measure the loss because the potential was never fully calculated.

Sound all-too-familiar?

It doesn't have to be that way.

Devising a contact management system that is as mechanized as you can possibly make it is the key to stopping this viscous cycle. Whether you use a system such as ACT or Outlook, or prefer to outsource your database entry and updating to a virtual assistant, the first step in this "system" is to put the people whose names you collect into categories.

Are they prospects, and if so, how serious? A list…B list? If they are potential strategic allies or referral sources, put them in the appropriate categories so you can tailor messages to them in a group communication. Remember vendors, too.

The next step is to work with a marketing person to determine how often and by what means will you contact these people. In this info-overload world, figure you need to make an impression on everyone in your database (including your past and current clients) at least 6-8 times per year.

Determine if you want those touches to be via email—maybe an email bulletin each quarter, a personal invitation to attend an event with you, and two seasonal post cards that promote a seminar or event you are hosting. You can even pre-plan your piece and pre-write them during a slower period—keeping them in the can until you are ready to implement them based on the schedule. And, consider outsourcing as much of this as you can, so you can simply approve proofs and cut a postage check with someone else steering the follow-up ship. From the writing and design, to the database maintenance, to a mail house, keep this vital marketing process as far away from your desk as you can, so it is one less responsibility that is way too easy to back-burner.

As another note, it is important to recognize that not all "touches" will be appropriate for everyone in your database; you can target your message depending upon the audience (vendors and referral sources may need a different message than clients, in some cases; yet the email bulletin or tip card could be appropriate for all to receive.) Just make sure each person hears from you six to eight times during the year at a minimum.

In addition to non-sales touches that are intended for top-of-mind awareness moreso than selling, you will want to determine which of the prospects in your stack of cards/database are candidates for more sales-oriented contacts. Then do it…or delegate it, too.

If you set a goal that you will have your company (even if it's not you) contact the top 10 or top 20 prospects you meet at a networking event or show within 5 days of returning from the show, stick to it. At the very least, buy yourself a few extra days by writing "it was a pleasure to meet you…will follow-up with you next week" notes while you're on the plane or as soon as you get back. Then, put those follow-up calls on someone's "to do" list and make sure they happen.

There is nothing worse than telling someone you will contact them and then not. Your credibility and dependability are already shot before you even get a chance to work with them. It's a shame when our society forces us to be so busy that we are stunned when someone who promises to do something actually does it. Hmmm—seems like good manners equals good marketing.

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