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Win Back Lost Accounts

Do you really hear your customers?

It can happen at any time, usually when you least expect it. Things are going great. Sales are good, your pipeline is full and your customers are happy. Or so you think. Then one day you get a voice message from a key customer who's decided to go with another company. Something's gone wrong. But what? And why? And what should you do?

For starters, do not panic. Sit down, take a breath, collect your thoughts and review the account. Don't automatically think it's your fault. The account may have been lost because of competitive forces, delivery, billing or pricing problems. There could be any number of reasons. Finding out what they are is your number-one job at this point.


AFTER THE BREAKUP

“Often, the cause of the breakup has nothing to do with what you did or didn't do as a salesperson,” says John Russell, senior business adviser for Midwest Family Broadcasting in Madison, WI. “In many cases, there could be a third party involved.”

The first step that Russell advises is to arrange for a face-to-face meeting with the client for the sole purpose of getting to the root of the problem. “This is purely a fact-finding meeting to gather information from the customer's point of view,” says Russell. “The salesperson needs to ask probing questions as to why the customer decided to jump ship and take notes to find out



TIM EVANS



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JOHN RUSSELL

Title: Senior Business Adviser

Company: Midwest Family Broadcasting, Madison, WI

Product: Sales and marketing for FM radio stations

Market: Madison, WI

what to do to get the business back.”

Marty Papper, sales manager of C&S Distributors in South Windsor, CT, wholeheartedly agrees. “We sell windows, cabinets, vinyl siding and other products to the building trades, a large percentage of which are blue-collar truck-and-ladder guys,” says Papper. “If a customer is slowing down on orders, our salesperson has to meet with him and find out why.”

Papper says he doesn’t often have a customer simply stop doing business with C&S. He continuously reviews what he calls a “Crack” report that identifies volume and can pretty much tell if an account is doing business elsewhere. Papper calls it Crack because it shows where sales are falling through the cracks.

“When a customer starts slowing down, I know he’s experiencing pain, and it’s up to our salespeople to find out why,” says Papper. “It may be that the salesperson hasn’t seen him for six months; one of our competitors sneaked in the door; we have a delivery or billing problem; or someone is carrying a product we don’t offer, which is costing our customer sales.”

After the fact-finding mission, Russell advises that the salesperson meet with the sales manager and go over the responses from the meeting and start to craft a win-back strategy.

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In the case of Papper, he knows why a customer is electing to go elsewhere. “In my sales experience in this industry, the number-one reason we lose business is because the salesperson has taken the customer for granted,” says Papper. “We do business the old-fashioned way, and it’s relationship selling. It’s plain and simple. If you’re not seeing customers on a regular basis to make sure all their needs are taken care of, you’re giving them a reason to walk.”

THE DAY OF RECKONING

Russell believes your win-back proposal should include a summary of the initial relationship, a statement of fact relating to what caused the breakup, a summary of the new needs of the customer and a commitment to make sure history doesn’t repeat itself.

“In my experience, with genuine care and concern for your customer, anyone can reestablish an account that has been

skill set

- **Face the facts. The account has gone off to greener pastures.**
- **Personally evaluate what happened to make it go away.**
- **Schedule and have an objective fact-finding meeting with the client to hear his or her side of the story.**
- **Whatever the reason, put together a plan that addresses it.**
- **If the plan is accepted, recognize you'll have to work harder than originally to restore trust and credibility.**
- **If the plan isn't accepted, resolve to get your "toe back in the tent" a little bit at a time.**

lost," says Russell. "But it requires humility and the desire to provide customers whatever it takes to make them satisfied.

Consultant Bill Brooks believes when a salesperson loses an account, the primary

goal is to get back under the tent and resurrect a relationship. Before salespeople decide what course of action to take, however, they need to do a little introspection. "Salespeople who lost an account need to determine what they've done wrong, what mistakes they made and what they can do to make it right," says Brooks.

According to Brooks, since a salesperson has identified why things went south, he or she needs to get in touch with the lost account with a "stopper" and put something in front of customers that grabs their attention. "It can be a special mailing or a FedEx package full of goodies, something that creates reciprocity and will prompt the account to call back or at least accept your calls," says Brooks. He offers the following tips to regain the business.

TIPS TO EARN TRUST AGAIN

- Take small bites to get the business back. Start by announcing any new or exciting changes in your company, upgrades or updates – anything that benefits the customer.
- Try like-rank selling. Bring your VP of

sales, marketing director or even the CEO into the loop. You may not have a big enough engine to pull the caboose.

- Exceed the customer's expectations. If you say you're going to call at 10 a.m., call at 9:50. If you promise delivery by Wednesday at 4 p.m., deliver on Tuesday at 4 p.m.
- Never, ever attack the competition or the customer's reason for leaving. It makes the lost customer look and feel stupid.

"Napoleon once said that to be outmaneuvered, yes; surprised, never. It's critical that salespeople have upstream intervention and know what's going on behind the scenes before it ever happens," says Brooks.

Bill Brooks is CEO of The Brooks Group, a sales and sales manager screening, development and retention corporation. For information call 1-800-633-7762, or go online to www.brooksgroup.com. – WILLIAM F. KENDY

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