



What To Do When The
Sales Call Stalls

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Jump-Start Stalled Sales Opportunities | 3 |
| Hey, I've Got An Idea! | 4 |
| WIIFM?..... | 4 |
| My Boss Wants To Talk To Your Boss | 5 |
| Assume Away | 6 |
| Let's Get Our Calendars Out..... | 6 |
| Trapped In "No" Man's Land? | 8 |
| Make Them Want You | 9 |
| Be Firm To Move Forward..... | 9 |
| Uncover Your Sales Prospect's True Level Of Commitment..... | 10 |
| Qualifying Sales Prospect Opportunities | 11 |
| "Busy" Is The New "Fine" | 12 |
| About The Author | 12 |

INTRODUCTION

Ever have a client chomping at the bit, excited about your solution to his problem — so much so that he needed your proposal by a certain date? You've always prided yourself on striking while the iron is hot, so you jumped through hoops, presenting him with a very competitive offer. He seemed impressed with your proposal, assuring you that he'd take it to committee and you'd have his decision in about a week. Well, a week came and went with no response. Undaunted, you tried to get through to her by voice mail, e-mail, even good old reliable paper correspondence — everything but carrier pigeons and Candygrams. You even recruited her trusty assistant to help out. But still, not a peep from your client, and after such a promising start, too. How do you get her to spring into action?

JUMP-START STALLED SALES OPPORTUNITIES

Think of when telemarketers call you at home. I always try to be courteous as I refuse, saying, "I'm afraid I really can't use your product/solution, but I'm sure it's excellent, and I wish you the best of luck on the rest of your calls." However, most people just hang up on telemarketers immediately or try to pass the buck, saying, "I'll have to discuss this with my spouse." By the same token, mid-level managers say, "I'll have to run this by my boss."

Suppose your prospect says, "What you're presenting really sounds interesting. Let me run this by my boss (partner, peer, cohort, associate or manager, etc.)." Now you've discovered someone else is involved in the decision-making process.

So you reply, "You'll run this by your boss? Great! Can we help you present? Can we set up a meeting with your boss?" That's an important question, but I'm afraid the response will most likely be "No." At this early stage, your prospects can be a little guarded about giving you access to their internal relationships. Not sure where to go next, you might ask, "When can I follow up?" Oops — not a good question to ask just yet!

Don't let your prospect squirm off the hook by telling you, "Give me a call next week." That response isn't good if the sales prospect is procrastinating or even lying about telling his boss about you. It's not fair to you or him. That's why it's so important to qualify the opportunity before asking when to follow up.

These crucial questions will determine whether you have a legitimate opportunity to pursue:

- **From a scale of 1 to 10 — 1 being poor, 10 being outstanding—where would our discussion rank concerning your level of interest?**
- Suppose your prospect ranks the discussion as a six. Ask: **What haven't I addressed or shared with you that would move it up from a six to a ten?**
- **Let me understand something prior to meeting with your boss: what is it you like most about what we've discussed so far?** This question lends clarity or depth to a key element that sparks your prospect's interest.
- On the other end of the spectrum, if your prospect seems to be hesitating, it's important to ask questions such as **What is it that seems to be causing you concern?** or **What's making you hesitate?** Before your prospect shares your ideas with his boss, you must understand his thought processes, find out his level of interest and commitment.

HEY, I'VE GOT AN IDEA!

They say you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Similarly, when it's a client you're trying to catch, you must master the fine art of intrigue. If you leave a voice mail that indicates you have something of real value this person would want to know more about, so much the better:

"Hi, Tom, it's (you) from (your company). Sounds like you've been absolutely swamped. I'm calling for two reasons: one, to follow up where we had left off, and two, I wanted to pass along some information about _____, which I think would be of real value to you. Please call me at _____."

WIIFM?

What's In It For Me? Now that you've insinuated to your client that there's good news on the horizon, there's a better chance that he'll call back. When he does, you'd better have something of real import or benefit to discuss. It can't be about your product, because the customer doesn't care about your product (not yet, anyway). It can't be about you, because the customer doesn't care about you. Customers care about themselves and how things will affect them and their businesses.

Well, what is in it for them? What do you have that appeals to their needs, their motivations? It can be an incentive that'll prompt your prospect to take action sooner...an article you found that would be useful in his career...a recent trade publication that tackles an issue geared to him...or even a recent success story about a client who's now enjoying the benefits of your business solution after you helped him overcome obstacles similar to the ones your prospect is facing. But make sure your follow-up calls have a genuine purpose — just “checking in” or “touching base” with nothing significant to say will only annoy a busy, time-crunched client. You don't want his first thought upon hearing your voice to be, “Uh-oh, it's that pest again! What does he want now? WIIFM?”

MY BOSS WANTS TO TALK TO YOUR BOSS

You haven't heard from that prospect who promised he'd get back to you a month ago, and you've tried to reconnect with him again and again. Time to play “Good Cop, Bad Cop.” Is it time to call his boss? If you do, will he be furious because you went over his head? It's crossed your mind to call his boss, but will that only ruffle more feathers? Will he retaliate by making sure you never get to do business with his company? Appealing to a higher authority takes the pressure off you by making it look like it's coming from another source — like your boss:

“Hi, Zach...Maybe you can help me. This morning, my boss asked me about the proposal we submitted to you last month. I have to admit he took me by surprise, so I didn't have an answer ready for him. As you can imagine, we've invested a lot of time and resources in putting together this solution for you, and you indicated that time was of the essence. Believe me, Zach, I know how busy you are, but I'm in a situation where my boss needs an answer. He told me that if I don't get back to him by this Friday, he wants to get involved and call ____ (Zach's boss) directly to arrange a meeting to review our proposed solution.”

This tactic allows you to have your authority reach out to his authority as an equal, helping you keep the lines of communication open. In addition, you're coming across as the “good cop” who's giving him a friendly heads-up to come forward and respond to you.

ASSUME AWAY

Although the common wisdom is to “never assume,” sometimes assuming can help galvanize your client into responding:

“Hi, Sean, I’ve been trying to reach you, but it sounds like you’ve had a pretty full schedule lately, since I haven’t heard back from you. Please do me a favor and give me a quick heads-up as to whether yes, you’re still interested, or no, you’re not. If I don’t hear from you within the next ____ days, I’ll assume your priorities have changed. Knowing these issues we’ve discussed concern others in your company, I’ll contact ____ (the client’s boss, peers, other decision-makers) so that we can continue to look at ways to (fix...change...reduce...increase...) your organization. I really appreciate the time and input you’ve shared with me. Hopefully, you and I can pick up where we left off. You can reach me at ____.”

If your contact doesn’t get back to you within your suggested timeline, consider it the go-ahead to get in touch with other company contacts. Then again, there’s a good chance your contact will answer you within your time frame. After all, she doesn’t want to look bad or be left out of the loop once you reach out to others.

LET’S GET OUR CALENDARS OUT

A stellar sales call where your prospect is interested or open to the next step, or better yet, wants to get others involved to hear your solution, can change from jubilation to frustration if he wraps up the meeting with vague remarks like, “Give me a call the end of next week. My boss will be back in the office, and I’ll see when he’s available to sit down with you.” You keep following up every way you know how without making a pest of yourself, only to find yourself in an endless game of voice mail tag. But if you lay the right groundwork, you can sidestep this scenario as well as confirming whether or not there’s a legit follow-up opportunity here.

Next time a prospect asks you to get back to him with ambiguous time frames, get him to commit to a specific date and time:

You: “When can I follow up with you?”

Prospect: “Call me at the end of next week.”

You: “Sounds good. Let’s get out our calendars and pencil in a time and date. What day should I call?”

Prospect: “Call me on Friday.”

You: “What time works best for you?”

Prospect: “Call me in the morning.”

You: “I know how hectic your schedule can be, so let’s pick a time now and avoid playing phone tag. Will 9 A.M. work for you?”

Prospect: “Yes, that’s fine.”

You: “Great! I’ll call you on Friday morning at 9. Here’s my phone number and e-mail address just in case something comes up, so you can reach me beforehand to reschedule.”

Don’t stop there! Make your prospect write it on his calendar if you can. Prospects willing to commit will say, “Great! Let’s get our calendars out!” Otherwise, it’s too easy to fall into the voice mail trap. How many times have you had this situation?

Prospect: “Sounds interesting. Give me a holler next week.”

You: “Great! When should I call you?”

Prospect: “Okay, try me next Tuesday morning.”

You: “I’ll be glad to call you. What time?”

Notice that the prospect isn’t too specific with his responses. It’s almost like you have to keep coming back with questions because you’re wondering, “Why doesn’t this prospect just commit to a specific time and date, instead of being so general with such a superficial time frame?” Ninety percent of the time, you know what’ll happen if they don’t commit to a solid date and time right away: when you call to follow up, you’ll get their voice mail. You’ll be frustrated because two months later, you finally get to chat with them only to find out, after all your attempts to reach them, that they weren’t interested after all. Let’s manage our time by managing the prospect!

How do you manage prospects? By having them commit — and you do that by insisting that they get out their calendar and agree to a specific, iron-clad date and time to follow up with you. Make sure you and your prospect respect each other’s time, by making him focus and commit to that callback. It’s important to make sure people honor their commitments, even if the commitment is as simple as making and being available for a follow-up call.

Reach out to your contact the day before, via e-mail, voice mail, etc., and remind them of the follow-up. Appeal to your prospect's sense of courtesy and decency: "Do me a favor, will you? Please do me the courtesy of letting me know if there's a conflict." Your time is important, too, so make prospects take you seriously; be sure they set that follow-up date in stone on their calendars, or they'll find ways to avoid following up with you while you find yourself languishing in voice mail jail with no parole. So approach a telephone follow-up just like you'd approach a face-to-face follow-up: make an appointment. When contacts ask you to follow up with them, hold them accountable. You'll not only help them manage their own time, you'll save your own precious time, so everybody wins!

TRAPPED IN "NO" MAN'S LAND?

You've been in too many situations like this; your prospects seem interested, yet never move forward because, it seems, they always have to answer to some colleague or authority figure. As time goes on, you stay in touch, calling periodically. Before long, it hits you that your prospect's just leading you down a path of non-commitment with phrases like:

- "Let me run it by my team."
- "Let me run it by my boss."
- "I'll share your ideas with the committee."

You'll close more sales when you ask non-committed sales prospects the right questions. If your business relationship seems to be stalling, and you're not getting any response from your contacts when you try to connect with them, here are three questions you need to ask yourself:

- "How solid is this so-called relationship?"
- "What amount of business, if any, am I currently getting from this contact?"
- "Can this person make all the decisions connected to my solution?
If not, who should I really be talking with?"

Sometimes, in business as well as in life, we have to get a **"no"** to free ourselves from a relationship wallowing in limbo. Does that sound negative, even painful? Well, think about it: every "no" frees up your time to focus on opportunities with prospects who'd gladly say "yes." Once you honestly assess the risks, four out of five times — that's 80% of the time — it's to everyone's advantage for you to be proactive.

MAKE THEM WANT YOU

How do you handle a situation where things seem to be going well, yet your prospect continues to stall, unable or unwilling to commit to a sale because other people are involved? You've contacted your veteran customer again and again, leaving voice mails and e-mails, even enlisting his assistant's help — and still not a peep out of your prospect. After repeated attempts, you're wondering whether it's worth the effort to keep going until you reach the point of no return. Research indicates that most prospects don't buy until after the salesperson communicates with them at least five times! But where do you draw the line? When does persistence turn into harassment? You can solve the mystery of "The Big Stall" by playing detective: investigate your prospect's case by asking the right questions.

Even if you have the "warm fuzzies" with a mid-level decision maker, challenges always rear their heads when others get involved. It's too easy for things to bog down and stall when you're trying to build business relationships. They have no real commitment to change their situation with your solution; they just can't bring themselves to say "no" (sound familiar?) or offend us. How do you avoid this trap when your relationship is with mid-level people trying to do the selling for you?

BE FIRM TO MOVE FORWARD

When you've tried everything you can think of to reconnect with warm and fuzzy prospects who've shown interest in you in the past, or customers who haven't done business with you in ages, the ultimatum tactic can be very effective. It goes something like this:

"Hi, Phil, this is (you) with (your company). You may recall that you had shared with me...

- the need to _____ (restate a problem he'd shared with you)...or
- the goal to _____ (a desire he wanted to bring to fruition)...

I've tried to reach you a number of times, and I haven't heard back from you. Unless I hear from you in the next _____ days or by _____ (give a deadline), I'll assume you're no longer interested, and therefore I won't call back. However, if this is still an issue with you, please give me a quick reply and a convenient time when we can talk for a few minutes. Thanks."

Surprisingly, an average of 60% of the time, this type of message will breathe life into the contact when every other attempt at resuscitation and communication has failed — enough life, at least, to galvanize your contact into getting back to you. Such ultimatums succeed where everything else fails because contacts don't want to risk missing out on promising future opportunities. The ultimatum takes a situation that's been in limbo and forces it into action. As a result, the salesperson

is communicating to his contact that the company's resources are valuable, including his time, and unless there is a response, he'll start refocusing his efforts on more productive, profitable opportunities — like your contact's competitors.

By now you're thinking, "But if I give my contact an ultimatum and he decides not to call back, game over!" Not necessarily! If you truly believe your contact still has a lot of potential, and you don't want to close doors, trade your no-callback leads with another sales rep on your team who has similar no-callback leads. Just because you're not calling your contact back doesn't mean another sales rep from your firm can't call him — and vice-versa. Sometimes a fresh face — or new voice — is just the shot of adrenalin the contact needs to make a business relationship come alive.

For customers who won't return your calls, it all comes back to managing your time more effectively and being able to focus on other opportunities with other prospects who may want to do business with you. Remember, customers who only say "Maybe" can end up robbing you of lots of time, energy, and resources that could be better focused elsewhere. In the spirit of Jerry Maguire, you must help your contacts help you, by guiding them towards giving you a solid "yes" or "no."

UNCOVER YOUR SALES PROSPECT'S TRUE LEVEL OF COMMITMENT

Are your prospects really going to "run it by their boss," or just trying to brush you off as courteously as possible to avoid offending you? Maybe they don't need you today but want to hedge their bets, putting you in their back pocket for the future when they can use what you're offering. That's not to say your prospects are deliberately deceiving you. It's just that they have their own motivations and priorities. Investigate and flush this information out of them.

Bring up potential objections now rather than later. This allows you to understand what the next step is. When a prospect responds, "Give me a call next week after I've had a chance to talk with others here," there's no commitment on their part, but it can sure be aggravating for you. Before you know it, a week turns into a month, and months become years. When we try to reestablish contact with that person, the trail grows cold. Asking the right questions in the beginning allows you to bring up potential objections now rather than later — to find out the next step. And if there is a next step, what "action" is your sales prospect willing to commit to?

QUALIFYING SALES PROSPECT OPPORTUNITIES

When a prospect says he'll run your ideas by his boss, your response could be: "Great, I'm glad to hear you'll be sharing these ideas with him. Let's assume your boss is in favor of this idea. What do you see as our next step?"

Listen closely for what happens next. For example, responses could be:

1. "We'll bring you in to meet with..."
2. "We'll have you do a presentation to the executive committee..."
3. "We'll give you a P.O..."

But why not test things out to determine if the conversation with his boss hasn't gone well? After all, that's what the real world of selling is all about. So go ahead and ask, in an innocent way, "What if your boss says he's not interested?" That will lead into the questions that will help you gauge this person's level of commitment and sincerity. Listen closely and they may be able to give you insight into their decision-making process, or any potential hurdles in the way, or the extent of the boss's sense of urgency in moving forward.

However, imagine your prospect says, "If my boss says 'no' to this, we're not doing anything." That tells me this person is too risk-averse to be your champion when he discusses your proposal with his boss. Or maybe the boss is the one who's risk-averse or has his own agenda. Ask such questions up front to qualify the opportunity; why wait until later to ask, risking rejection and disappointment? If a prospect isn't taking you seriously or simply isn't a good fit, it's better that you find out sooner rather than later. Sure, we'd all love every sale to be a grand slam, but salespeople also need to realize that their solution may not be the right fit for every prospect. Stop wasting valuable time and energy trying to sell to people who have absolutely no interest in what you're offering; instead, solve these mysteries by asking the right questions to stop the stall in its tracks so you can use your own and your client's valuable time wisely.

“BUSY” IS THE NEW “FINE”

How many times have you agreed with a prospect on a follow-up time and date, doing everything right, but you’ve still been blown off? If that’s the case, you must size up the prospect and the situation and decide what kind of person you’re dealing with — and whether this person is worth spending this kind of time and energy on.

In many ways, it’s about time management. People are less likely to blow off a follow-up with you if it’s an in-person follow-up. When people know you’re coming to see them, that you’ll be physically present in their office, they’ll place more value on this face-to-face visit and be less likely to cancel out on you. People try to justify blowing someone off by saying how busy they are. So what? We’re all busy! As Prevention Magazine contributor and fitness expert Chris Freytag says, “busy” has become the new “fine”: “How have you been?” “Busy.” Everybody’s busy nowadays!

To increase your odds of connecting with your prospect, reach out to him by phone, voice mail or e-mail the day before you’re due to follow up. Tell them in a pleasant but firm way, “This is just a reminder about the follow-up appointment we’ve scheduled for tomorrow.” It’s important to make sure people honor their commitments. Even if it’s something as simple as the prospect saying they’ll take your call, make sure they do so. It’s common courtesy. Everybody deserves that.

When people continue to blow you off, there’s a message there: they don’t value you and what you’re offering, so you don’t have a genuine opportunity here. It’s rather like what Dr. Phil McGraw says: “You teach people how to treat you.” In the business world, that means standing your ground with prospects, in a courteous but firm way that will leave them feeling obligated to follow up with you. Being firm with your prospects about locking them into their commitments may seem like a bold, risky move, but it can pay off handsomely once they’ll realize you mean business and must be taken seriously.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Cherry is Managing Partner of the Philadelphia-based sales and leadership training organization **Performance Based Results**, Recognized as the leading authority on asking the right questions to win in business and in life, Cherry is the author of the top-selling book **Questions That Sell** (AMACOM) and the soon to be released book **Questions That Lead**. Paul Cherry can be reached at **302-478-4443** or e-mailed at cherry@pbresults.com



Performance·Based·Results

4 Chatterly Lane • Wilmington DE 19803 USA • 302-478-4443 • AskPBR@pbresults.com

www.PBResults.com