

You don't have to answer every call

by Andy Szebeni, a director of A&P

Ever heard of Roger Anni's? To some he is a hero. To the Royal Mail a zero! Mr Anni's is the postman who told residents on his round how to opt out of junk mail that annoys many of the recipients but generates billions in revenue for his employer!

This got me thinking about the attitude of marketers and prospects to cold calls: the telephone equivalent of junk mail. In this article I am appealing to all of us in small business to look before we leap when it comes to our reactions to approaches from potential suppliers. OK, I am biased, so I will be gracious enough to even give you some hints on how to stem the flow of unwanted marketing calls! But first, an appeal from an insider.

I like to think I am an authority on this subject because my company is what is described by critics as a "culprit" and by our clients as a "proponent" of telemarketing. Note I say "telemarketing" and not "telesales". This is wholly deliberate.

The phone is a poor medium for selling. It is great for sifting prospects and building interest. That is why the vast majority of our work is setting appointments for our clients. It is the CLIENT that then goes and sells.

In fact, if the phone is used correctly, it is used to find people that already want your product but don't know it yet. If you are about to move business premises and a telecommunications company calls you up and offers to organise your new lines, quote for the new system and data cabling and buy your old system, then you would probably be grateful for the serendipity.

On the other hand, you get another call from a mobile phone company even though you have no need to change your phone. That is simply irritating. But the difference between the two scenarios is merely timing.

Telemarketing seems to have such a bad reputation because it is often done so badly. We have all had incidents with an incomprehensible accent from Indo-Asia, an appalling quality line that connects after several seconds' of delay, the over-familiar caller that asks "How are you today" or the pushy double



glazing call. These people are paid very little, have very little training, endure great stress and abuse and to them it is just a numbers game. It does not have to be this way.

You will have received polite professional and brief calls from telemarketing firms in the past. But I bet you don't remember them. Except where you actually DID book an appointment. That is the point: if executed well, it is seamless and causes very little disruption. It is how the telemarketer deals with the "No"s that is as important as they deal with the bookings in my view. The counter view is "who cares about those who aren't interested"? And it is companies that sympathise with this view, that give telemarketing a bad name.

So I promised some advice on reducing the amount of cold calls you receive:

1. Register at the telephone preference service at www.tps-online.org.uk. This will only stop calls from UK-based companies that are members of the direct marketing association scheme. All telephone marketing companies are supposed to ensure that any name they call has been "cleared" with the TPS list. In theory large fines can be dished out. In reality, no-one has been prosecuted.
2. Bar calls from companies withholding their numbers. The less reputable

companies frequently do not display the outgoing number because they do not want you calling them back when the call goes wrong! Unfortunately this will barr calls from friends and family that don't want people to see their numbers.

3. Get a good personal assistant! You don't have to employ someone full time. Your local FSB will certainly have some virtual assistants as members. You can divert your calls to them during the working day and they can sift callers for you.

4. Make sure you have different business number from your home number.

It is surprising how many people that work from home do not do this. It does not necessarily mean paying rental on a second phone line. BT offer a service called Call Sign that will give you a second number and the phone will ring differently.

5. Tell the telemarketer that the person they want has moved away. Even if that person is you! There is no point them talking to you if it is a business call because the telemarketers in most cases will simply put that down as a failed call.

6. Be careful who you give your number to! The process is called "data capture" and there are dozens of companies posing as internet directories, competitions and surveys. Only give your business card or telephone number to organisations you know and trust.

But above all remember that one day you might be glad that your new favourite supplier called you out of the blue!



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