

ENTERPRISE

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Sales solutions

How to effectively follow up after a first meeting

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Question: I have no problem getting the first appointment and filling up my pipeline with new opportunities; however, I tend to lose prospects in the follow-through. I follow up when prospects ask me to, but oftentimes they don't return my calls. How many times should I call a prospect when they don't get back to me right away? I want to be persistent, but not a pest.

Answer: I want to be clear that this advice is based on the assumption that you're working with the right decision makers of qualified prospects.

My older, wiser sister says, Don't quit five minutes before the miracle. In other words, if you're not persistent when following up with prospects, you may make a final attempt to contact them just before they're ready to buy.

What you described is a common challenge with many salespeople. Most of us are so concerned with being a "pest" that we err on the side of not being persistent enough. In my experience, it takes anywhere between four and 10 attempts at following up after the initial appointment to get a response from the prospect and move to the next level in the sales cycle. Many times prospects don't get right back to us simply because they are busy. So, it's important to be both patient and persistent.

There are a few things you can do to increase your likelihood of connecting with your prospect during the follow-through.

- First and foremost, always, always, always, send a handwritten thank-you note after the first meeting, before making any follow-up phone calls or sending any e-mail. If you're able to include an article that's relevant to their business or some other item of interest to them, include that as well. Do not use the thank-you note as a means of selling, only to thank the prospect and offer additional valuable information as it relates to them.
- Call your prospect's cell phone number, rather than office number.

When calling the cell number, if you don't reach the prospect and instead get voice mail, don't leave a message. Cell phones these days list the phone numbers of missed calls; and let's face it, we're curious to know who called when we miss a call from someone who didn't leave a message.

- If you prefer to leave a voice-mail message, tell the prospect you have a couple more questions to ask them -- rather than calling to answer any questions they have.
- If you prefer sending e-mail as a follow-up after the initial meeting and the prospect doesn't respond within a week, send the exact same e-mail again one week after sending it the first time. You can keep track of the e-mails you send in Outlook either in a folder or as a "to do" on your calendar. Send the same initial follow-up e-mail you sent three times, one week apart. Usually by the third time you send it, you will get a response.

Also, try alternating phone calls and sending e-mail so you give the prospect the option of either calling you back, or sending an e-mail based on what's easiest for them.

Now, there is a limit to how often to follow up and for what length of time to continue following up. If the prospect is completely unresponsive after you've sent the same e-mail three times and have left several voice-mail messages, over a period of a month or more, stop following up, for now. If prospects ignore you after many attempts on your part, they are either not interested, or something has happened in their business or personal life that is preventing them from getting back to you. It could also be that either they have made a decision to go with another solution, whether it be internal or with one of your competitors, or something in their business has changed that makes your product or service unnecessary.

Before giving up completely on the follow-through, I recommend doing two things:

- Wait two months between your last attempt and your next attempt. Sometimes after time has passed, it may be easier to reach the prospect. Things may have settled in either their personal or business life, if that in fact was the reason the prospect didn't get back to you initially. It could be that they still have a need for your product or service, but have simply forgotten about it since meeting with you.
- As a final attempt only, you can try a technique I call the take-away. The take-away technique leaves it up to the prospect to call you when they're ready to proceed. It goes something like this:

"Hi Mr. Prospect, this is Andrea Sittig-Rolf with Sittig Northwest. I've made several attempts to contact since our first meeting and have not been able to reach you. I understand you are very busy and that you haven't had a chance to get back to me. I won't be contacting you again, so please feel free to contact me when you're ready to proceed with the solution we discussed. I can be reached at 206-769-4886. Thank you."

Now I know what you're thinking ... it's risky. Yes, it is, that's why it's designed to only be used as a final attempt. When you've reached the point where it's obvious to you that the prospect is no longer interested or has decided on another solution, try this technique as a last resort.

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