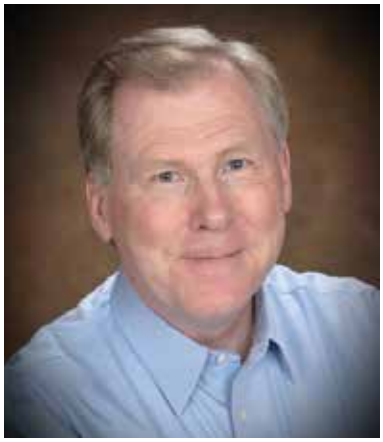
Keep calm and respect sales leads



by David Foster
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Few of us have participated in sales meetings where the subject of sales leads does not come up. "We need more leads," or "Show us follow-up on the leads we've given you" are perennial rallying cries heard in virtually every QBR or rep/supplier/channel partner business meeting. As sales professionals, we are constantly hunting for new opportunities, prospects and markets to serve, and rightfully so.

As a manufacturer, we have teams who attend trade shows, study CRM results, analyze point of sale, assist with technical inquiries, process online RFQs, and in general, have oversight responsibility for tracking the global business. Our manufacturers' reps, like yours, are bright, capable and hungry. Despite our collective zest for exemplary service, however, our customers too often tell us that we either 1) ignore their requests (quite common), or 2) bombard them with additional questions or qualifiers, require registration or cause some other "friction" that crosses the line from being responsive to becoming intrusive.

In this area, our industry has been caught napping, and we need to more quickly recognize, respect and react to the dramatic shifts taking place in our customers' worlds. How customers get information, what they share, what they want and don't want have transformed the balance and understanding of when to push and when to step back.

Electronic commerce and Internet retailers have taught us a thing or two about the new concepts of selling. No one likes the idea of being defined by their competition, but it is beneficial to consider for a moment how each of us likes to be treated when we shop in our personal lives. When we want the full service of a salesperson, a call back, or when we just want the information we asked for are probably not much different for an engineer or purchasing professional.

In his book "Digital Body Language," author Steven Woods covers in detail the difference between inquiries, marketing qualified leads, sales accepted leads, sales qualified leads and closed business. By thoughtfully filtering leads into categories, we as manufacturers accomplish two things: respect for our reps' time and respect for the customer.

Our reps deserve qualified referrals with real revenue potential, and our customers — large or small — deserve answers, fast. It is simply more practical to place the onus of lead management onto the manufacturer, and own responsibility to honor the hectic pace and day-to-day workload of our manufacturers' reps. It is the reps who provide access to accounts, projects and decision-makers. As the supplier, we need to respect how that access was earned and can be squandered by mismanaging our reps' time.

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Another sales lead source is not inquiries at all, but rather the sensible tracking of our customer churn — those end users who have trailed off or are new to our business. Some manufacturers weave this function onto their inside sales teams; others have true sales development reps; but again, a reasonable approach is to pass qualified revenue opportunities to reps via the CRM and then track accordingly. A good lead can also be an expiring quote or a suggested upgrade from an existing product.

Manufacturers and reps have an opportunity to collaborate on these ideas in advance and integrate the concepts into the formal lead program.

Prospective buyer sources are not infinite, so let's treat all inbound inquiries with TLC.

How about this as a message to our fellow suppliers? *Respect.*

R - Reply to the customer, quickly. Answer the question, interpret the data sheet, send the list of authorized distributors and do whatever the customer asked.

E - Expect no details. Commonly requested information should be shared by us, without hesitation, or conditions, such as answering surveys, registering, etc.

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FROM THE FLOOR: Sales leads

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S - Selling while replying is OK. Remind the customer why we are the best at what we do, how our products outperform, save time and money.

P - Propose an action. Would the customer like a sample? A white paper that explains a concept in greater detail? A follow-up call? The answers here determine if we have permission from the customer to push further.

E - Elevate only the best leads for follow-up and action. Agree with the reps prior at what point they would be expected or want to dedicate time and see the customer.

C - Coaching while replying is OK. Offering tips, options and examples, especially when the customer does not expect it, establishes us as teachers and full-service experts in our field. If the customers want more details, they will know who to call.

T - Thanking while replying is mandatory. Giving the customers a clear path (if you need more information, call, click, etc.) is expected.

With thanks to Aretha Franklin for the above, wishing you all a successful 2018. ■

SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW: Bill Romick

(continued from page 7)

Instagram and Twitter. I have had to face the reality that I am an "old guy." (My son told me "old guys" use Facebook only a month before a new customer made the same observation!) The ERA team has provided great opportunities to learn how our customers use and respond to social media.

I think Scott Lindberg and John Hutson are a bit overboard on their social media posts though! (You can get me back later, guys.)

What is one interesting fact that people may not know about you?

I held an Ohio Peace Officer Certification from 1982 to 1990. I joined the Wayne County Sheriff's Reserves in 1981 and later served the city of Orrville as a part-time patrolman through 1990. ■

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