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Is Telesales a Viable Marketing Alternative?

By SCOTT H. CYTRON, ABC, AND TINA FERGUSON

Managing partners, shareholders and other firm managers often complain of too many referral sources and not enough leads. Referral sources include attorneys, financial planners, current clients, business partners and others who have a reason to interact with your business.

Sources like these certainly generate leads, and work really well for quite a bit of time. However, once you've worked the referrals and held yet another lunch meeting, going back to the same well for another drink of water – a.k.a. more leads – is difficult for even the most astute and gregarious of the networking CPAs.

With today's volatile economy, firms spend much of their energy and effort providing on-point client deliverables to their clients, yet find themselves with a real-life lack of time to implement various marketing and sales activities, which might include cross-selling the firm's services to existing clients, marketing their skills and services to prospects, or even increasing sales on the reseller front.

Firm owners tell their peers and marketing staff that they would rather have five leads for every one referral source because the owner, business development person and others from the firm usually can turn a lead into a prospect, and in turn, close the deal. One way to generate those leads is through an outbound telesales program.

TELESALES BRINGS RESULTS

If the thought of having callers dial perfect strangers and use your name to sell your services is foreign or sounds unpro-

fessional, think again. According to the American Teleservices Association, teleservices generated \$661 billion in revenues in 2002 on 180 million sales transactions and, as an industry, employed 5.7 million people – one of the most aggressively growing segments of business process outsourcing.

Call centers provide firms and companies with the resources needed to take their message to target markets. For accounting firms of all types, the lack of resources to take their ideas to the marketplace is one of the reasons they turn to outbound call centers – and it's not just the Fortune 500 or the Big 4 that are using call centers to generate a buzz. Although the accounting firms mostly hear how call centers benefit the ultra-large firm or company, once they learn about the benefits weighed against the costs, many smaller firms also realize the advantages inherent in using centers to generate leads and boost profits.

QUITE DIFFERENT THAN TELEMARKETING

"Sales automation achieved through call centers can provide phenomenal results when used deliberately and strategically," says Toby Gilman, senior vice president of Dallas-based SalesLogic (www.sales-logic.com). "Many people think this is just one step away from telemarketing, but in fact, the entire process is very professional and actually a lot of fun. It's about delivering results."

Formerly with Ernst and Young, LLP, Gilman implemented a telesales program for the Big 4 firm as a means to reach C-level executives (CEO, CFO, CIO) – exactly the audience Gilman says are the

decision makers that CPA firms of all sizes need to reach. He combined a powerful marketing strategy with college graduates to generate a results-oriented marketing message to contact and set appointments with 5,000 executives who work for Fortune 1,000 companies. Within 20 months, these appointments resulted in \$100 million in incremental revenue for E&Y – all at a cost of less than \$1 million.

“Call centers provide access to the marketplace; however, many variables must come together to drive results,” says Gilman. “Our outbound representatives were college graduates who were articulate and could speak in business terms, and the product itself offered incredible results. We were able to leave a message and have the CEO of the company actually call us back.”

DON'T IGNORE THE SALES EFFORT

When CPA partners focus on activities like telesales as a viable marketing alternative, the entire process leads to larger questions regarding sales itself. Gilman says many companies may want to jump head first into telesales without the back-end processes in place to actually close the deal.

Within 20 months, these appointments resulted in *\$100 million* in incremental *revenue* for E&Y – all at a cost of less than \$1 million.

“Telesales professionals can set appointments until they are blue in the face, but if you don't have the wherewithal or internal systems to actually make the sale,

you've lost your investment,” he says. “No matter who you are, you can be reasonably assured that all parts of your sales processes could probably become more efficient. The first step is accepting the fact

Telesales professionals can *set appointments* until they are blue in the face, but if you don't have the *wherewithal* to make the sale, you've lost your *investment*.

that sales will always be a people-dependent activity, and any time you have more than one person closing a deal, there will be some unavoidable inefficiencies.”

Bob Howard, founder and managing director of SalesLogic, says the way to begin evaluating the sales process within a firm is to write down the roles of your current sales staff and how they fit into your sales process, then build a diagram that reveals your sales process as it flows through various roles. In doing so, this will reveal the redundancies and bottlenecks that are probable areas of investment. If the flow is reasonably smooth with little redundancy, then look to see where the biggest impact could be made by suddenly adding many more people, like identifying replicable tasks.

“Your investment will prevent you from needing all those bodies, but it's a good indication of the potential impact of investing in that role,” says Howard.

“The lesson to be learned from call centers is that every person does a very

specific, narrowly defined role the most efficient way possible. If you have a sales role that you can narrowly define and that role has a big impact in either creating more leads or closing more sales, it will be easy to institute consistent behaviors that will best use the technology you invest in. Your people have to have a disciplined, consistent methodology or the technology won't effectively leverage your efforts.”

GETTING YOUR TELESales PROCESS STARTED

Knowing which solutions fit your scenario is merely a matter of creative market research. As soon as you define the area you would most like to improve, start talking to local call centers about what they can do for you, instead of you doing it yourself. If they can't help, get a referral. Eventually, you'll find a call center that specializes in outsourcing exactly what you want to sell.

In addition, talk with your peers and others in the accounting profession who can speak to either the success of something like telesales or even retooling the internal sales force. If you or your partners cannot justify outlaying the costs associated with call centers, consider taking a portion of your practice and testing it for leads with a call center. You'll get comfortable with the process and determine whether this marketing tool is for you and your firm.

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