

How to attract new clients without the hard (or even the soft) sell

It's the new, better approach to sales

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Welcome. If selling is a bit of dirty word in your world then this is the perfect guide for you. But even if you love the idea of a hard-fought sale (but are struggling to get the results you need) this is still the right guide for you.

Why? Because there is a new era in the sales world which is altogether more civilised, more ethical, more helpful and I would say, easier and more pleasant too. And I'm about to share it with you.

The good news is that like I said, it's not hard but it does require a different approach and a little bit (just a little bit) of effort from you.

Why selling doesn't work – and why listening will generate more new business

For some, the word *selling* conjures up uncomfortable images of persuasion, manipulation and control – having to manage a conversation with a prospect to such an extent that you get them to sign the contract before they've had time to draw breath.

For others, *selling* is a word they loathe with a passion, often because they hate being sold to – and this puts them off the whole principle of sales for life.

Does the idea of having to 'sell' leave you cold?

For another, wider group – people who've never been involved in sales, introverts, gentler souls, non-people people, technical industry specialists, the less-confident – well, the word *selling* just leaves them cold.

The great news is that you don't have to be able to sell to get more new business

In fact, it actively helps if you don't. But what you do have to do, is to listen. And you do have to help.

Not convinced that new business is not just a numbers game?

In my first ever iteration as a somewhat reluctant New Business Director, I tried selling, and it didn't work for me. My firm hired someone to support me, an outsourced sales consultant with a job description not that unlike mine now (yikes!). But his way just wasn't my way.

His way of generating more new business was a numbers game, a cold-calling game, a 'keep on banging the phones and you'll get there' game. So I tried it (hard to think why,

now, but I did, because I was new to this) – and it just didn't sit right with me.

And it didn't work. And I couldn't see how this approach fitted with us being able to charge what our services were actually worth – and what we needed to charge to survive.

That was 11 years ago, and meanwhile I was being *paid* to get more new business in. So I had to find another way.

How a mentor helped to get me started

I began with finding a mentor – one that understood me, understood the world of higher-value professional services, one with the same values as me.

I only spent one day with this guy (if you're interested, he's Blair Enns, of Win Without Pitching, a Canadian guy who teaches marketing agencies how to win new clients without giving away their creative for free) and he cost £1,000. Plus VAT, probably.

£1,000 was a lot to pay for a day's training 11 years ago and it still seems a lot now. But if you balance that against grasping the vital principles of what you need to know and do to become a truly sustainable thought-leader in your own niche – one that your clients and prospects will turn to for advice, support and consultancy, one that your clients want to buy from without you having to sell – then it no longer feels like a lot to pay at all. It feels like a real bargain.

And suddenly, it wasn't about selling any more

Instead, it was all about becoming an expert in our own space and about being a valuable, helpful resource for our prospects and clients.

And so, what I learnt was that in any conversation or communication that I might need to have with a prospect – by phone, email, blog, on the website, a newsletter etc. – I simply needed to make sure that we were being that resource. To me, that sounded eminently do-able. And it fitted with my own values.

Be helpful? Be a valuable resource? How exactly?

I know where to start, I thought. Let's begin with writing stuff that answers the types of questions our clients ask us.

Bearing in mind we were highly experienced in healthcare marketing already...

- Let's explain and unwrap the mysteries of the NHS buying structure for all

those companies trying to sell into the NHS.

- Let's carry out a survey into GPs preferred methods of communication and ways of learning about new healthcare services and then share that with clients or prospects.
- Let's run workshops for marketing directors on who buys what in private hospitals, and how.
- Let's create a calendar of relevant events that would be useful to attend to people selling into the NHS

Powerful stuff

But more importantly, this '*don't sell, listen*' approach was especially relevant in the most powerful form of communication in the buying cycle, which is a face-to-face discussion.

Yes cripes – I mean a sales meeting!

Once upon a time...

I would have worried about how I would *sell* my firm to a prospect at a meeting:

- What would my 60 second elevator pitch sound like?
- Would I be able to get across the breadth and depth of all that we did if we only had 20 minutes together?
- How would I *persuade* them to give us the work?

The wrong way to handle meetings to get more new business

The old way was all about how beautiful my PowerPoint presentation was and whether our designer had remembered to put in the logo of Brand X that we were now working with.

Had they changed the 4th bullet point down on page 12 of the creds deck (marketing agency slang for credentials presentation)?

Would I remember to name-drop our biggest client Brand Y and its billion pound turnover, just to impress them?

Looking back, I can see why I did it. Because it was all that I knew, and it was how everyone else was doing it when I went to meetings at a more junior level. But boy, can I now see why I stopped doing it...

A better way to handle meetings to get more new business

Forget sales meeting, and think helping meeting. You're just there to help your customer, or prospect. The thing to do is to go, listen very carefully and very actively – and then ask really good questions.

You simply focus on what your customer actually needs and then give them as much advice, support and help as you can – anything that brings them closer to being able to solve their problem.

Connect with your clients in their world

By asking smart, relevant questions, you automatically position yourself as an expert that understands the problem they've got. You'll be connecting with them in their world, using their language.

By listening carefully to the answers, you'll be able to identify immediate gaps in their knowledge and their ability to fix it themselves. This is where your company comes in.

If these gaps are something your firm is really good at plugging, then you can move on to talk about ways you've solved these problems before, for companies similar to theirs. The challenges you've tackled, approaches you've used, lessons you've learned.

Give away your knowledge for free

Why? Because it's the right thing to do. And because in doing the right thing, you will attract more new clients.

It can even lead them into the early stages of a briefing, so they begin to feel that they've invested time and energy into you – because you are being proactively helpful in getting them to think clearly about what the problem is.

And lo! – no longer do you need a PowerPoint. In fact, you need a lot less.

- No 'all about you' creds deck

- No big 60 pitch
- No name-dropping
- No showing off
- No persuading
- No talking about all the different services you can provide if needed

What you do need to do in a sales meeting

You do, however, need to know your onions. And your business. And your topic. And your client. And that means you do need to:

- **Research the client and the individual you're meeting properly.**
 - Visit their website, Google any PR, news stories etc.
 - Read their LinkedIn profile, previous job history, background and what they (claim to) care about
- **Research the client's clients**
 - This will help tell you what they really care about
- **Find out about other suppliers they use in your area.**
 - Just Googling 'case studies [services] [client name]' can bring up interesting results
- **Prepare questions for your meeting.**
 - Sounds obvious, but amazing how rarely I see this happen

The role of case studies in a client meeting

As you dig deeper with your (brilliantly considered, carefully articulated) questions, this is where case studies come in. Or if not at this meeting, then at the next one.

You can quickly demonstrate how, time and time again, you've successfully solved the same problems for similar clients, using an organised methodology or process – with tangible results and outcomes.

With testimonials and invitations to talk to satisfied clients, you can reassure your

prospect that they would be in safe hands. That you've done this lots of times before. And it's worked every time.

A big but

So, this isn't about selling. This is about helping your clients. **BUT.** The only way you'll be helping them is when you know in your heart of hearts that you are the right supplier for them – and they're the right client for you. You know you can add value, and that what they need is what you really do.

If they're asking for things you've never done before – but you're sure you could if you try (how hard can it be?), or if you go and find a partner to hook up with, or call in some clever subcontractors – ask yourself this question:

Are you really helping them, or are you helping yourself?

You're only helping when you're being honest. By honestly telling prospects, when you've identified their problems clearly, that you're not necessarily the right people to help – you are being helpful.

Even better, you might be able point them in the direction of someone who can. And for that, you will be remembered. Remembered for what you actually do best, and for helping them find the right supplier when it wasn't you they were looking for.

Well, that's what I believe – and it's always worked for me.

Attract new clients by giving things away

Yup. You read that right earlier in this book and here it is again. And because it can be a bit of a thorny subject, it's worth a little bit more attention.

There are lots of different ways to attract new clients, and some of those routes-to-market can be more challenging than others. But one of the simplest methods– and in my opinion, the most satisfying – is to give away something of value to you.

Something that you know your lovely prospects will also really appreciate, need or want. But what?

Well, we've talked about knowledge already, so now let's look a bit deeper.

It might be timely information, useful advice, in-depth resources or a chance to test something. It might be giving away some of your time for free, or letting them try out a

particular service, the try-before-you-buy approach.

For this to work, it has to have value to you

But whatever it is – and this is the important bit – you have to give it freely and without strings. Or people smell that rat. Which rat do I mean? The hard sell rat. Because what people will truly value is not WHAT you have given them, but the WAY that you have given it – and that is where you can start to build a relationship.

Who can give what to attract new clients?

So you have to give away something that has value to you, and give it without the expectation of reward. Or the giving is meaningless in the context of building a relationship – because people see straight through the giving-in-order-to-get approach.

Consultants and advisers

They can give their time. For them, time is money, so it's precious – and prospective customers know and appreciate that. Best of all, giving that time can make an immediate difference to a prospect.

So take the time for a face-to-face meeting, make suggestions based on your experience, steer them away from directions you think may be wrong (and explain why) – all in that first meeting.

Creatives and designers

Creatives and designers can give ideas, sketches or thoughts on approach, colour and style. Take good paper and pens along, cut snippets out of a magazine or have the meeting in an art gallery for inspiration.

Invite the prospect to bring along 10 of their favourite photographs or to set up a Pinterest board (if they are that way inclined) that you can view to get more insight into what they like.

Market researchers

Market researchers can ask questions – lots of them, in different ways. List out – just from experience – ten smart questions that help to answer a few of the most common problems that your clients have struggled with in the past.

Explain the differences between some of the technical terms, share your knowledge,

boost your prospect's understanding. Simplify or demystify some of the processes involved in research.

Encourage a prospect to lean on you for insight, education or information about your specialist area – and give it freely and willingly.

Retail and commerce

In the world of retail, products and ecommerce, the transaction is a bit different. In fact, anyone with a product of any sort can of course give physical stuff away. To loyal customers, to randomly selected prospects – there's a chance to surprise and delight people with spontaneous gifts, samples, new product lines and more.

But this can have a very low perceived value to the customer (a free Mars Bar is yummy, but who's kidding if we think that gift has any real value to Mars PLC? On the other hand, a Breitling watch might be nice...)

So the opportunity here, lies in seeing how you can give away something of value to you and to the customer, to create greater trust in the brand – without breaking the bank. You may have to get quite creative and you'll have to understand your customer, but you can always find something.

How much should you give for free?

This is a much more difficult question to answer, because it's different for everyone.

Yes, there is a fine line to be drawn between (at one extreme) travelling around the country offering out free advice willy-nilly to anyone who asks. Helpful but not terribly profitable.

And (at the other extreme), guarding one's time so preciously that if a prospect calls with a query you tell them you won't invoice them unless the call takes longer than 3 minutes. Just horrible.

So the answer is – it's up to you

But it has to fit with your own business proposition, your brand, your personality and your way of working.

I give my help and my time. From my own perspective and over the years in different scenarios, I've gained new clients through a mixture of giving and helping:

1. Helping people find permanent work when I have good contacts in a

particular area – and no, I don't charge fees

2. Helping people find freelance work when I think there's a good fit between client and freelancer – ditto
3. Free breakfast briefings with specialist content that clients have told us they want to learn more about – standard B2B method of sharing useful knowledge and creating stronger relationships with prospects
4. Putting people in contact with other people who you think could benefit from knowing each other – just because you can
5. Writing long-form articles to pass on what I've learnt about positioning, sales and marketing to people who are newer to it. Admittedly, I like writing. And it helps clients to understand my approach and skill set. (So it shouldn't really be in this list...but it might be in yours)
6. Barter arrangements where I'm the wrong fit price-wise for a very small business, but they have something that I very much value and we can do swapsies to benefit both of us – win/win
7. Writing a – very rough – business development action plan for a prospect on the back of a two hour meeting. This could either be used as a blueprint for action, a guide for ideas, or never referred to again. I sent it with a health warning that it might not be right for them (as the thinking in it stemmed purely from experience rather than careful market research and planning) – done mainly to demonstrate where I could add value and to help them assess whether it was possible/best for them to just get it done in-house without me

Going too far

The last one – number 7 – would be going too far for many people. But I'm quite a spontaneous person, so I don't take long (not long enough?) to think through whether I should give help or give something away for free.

By the time I've thought about it, I've usually already gone and done it. Pinged off the introductory email. Stuck a bunch of proactive suggestions on a Word doc and sent it over. Asked a friend to put a new freelancer in touch with someone. And that suits me and my way of working.

People have often asked me whether I feel like I'm losing money – or at least losing the opportunity to earn money – by doing these things for free. The answer is, I never feel like that. And I have picked up clients in doing it. Makes me happy.

So, what can you do? Here's some homework

Grab a pen and paper and list out a whole load of things that your clients and customers would love to have for free.

Put your empathy-o-meter on, get client curious, sit in their shoes and think about what would really help them – crucially, it might not be directly connected to what you offer, but it may still be something you can help with.

For example, I'm not a recruiter, but I seem to help find a lot of people work – I love it, it makes me feel good, people appreciate it and somehow clients seems to appear off the back of it. Bit of a mystery really.

Then balance your list with the time you have available at the mo – it's not always the right time to be giving stuff away for free. Take into account your own personality, style and attitude. It has to feel right for you and your business.

Then... get giving. It feels wonderful. New customers will follow.

Busting some myths

By now I hope you're getting your head around the idea of a new, helpful approach to sales and I really hope you're going to find it much easier, much more comfortable than the old way.

But if you're still a little apprehensive and the thought of getting out there and doing this helpful, listening thingy, then here's a few things to remember that should give your confidence that little extra boost.

1. Sales (and marketing as well) is common sense, not a mystical, dark art.

OK, there are areas where creative talents or very specific digital skills will help you get stuff done quicker or more elegantly, but most of the core stuff is just common sense.

If you keep the following pointers in mind, you'll be on the right track. Who are your target audience? Which groups are the most profitable? Where do they spend their time? If you don't know, you can go about asking them. What

problems do they have that you are you able to solve?

- 2. To be good at sales you need to be extrovert, pushy, good at handling continuous rejection and have a big black book of hot contacts ready to go.** Absolutely NOT and this comes straight back to "listening, not selling".

Think first about who you like to do business with – A.K.A. how you like to be sold to? Is it by the pushy bloke who won't take no for an answer – or the interesting one you've had good business discussions with?

Is it the won't-go-away one who keeps calling to tell you about yet another 'amazing discount' – or the really normal sounding one whose blog you sometimes read and who invites you to get in touch if you need help?

Is it someone who is trying to sell you something, or is it someone you've built a relationship with over time, that you know, like and trust? Someone perhaps who listens and helps.

- 3. To be good at sales, you need to be confident.** Yes you absolutely do, but not in the way you might be thinking. You don't need to be ballsy, out-there and networking-tastic.

You need to be confident in the service you offer, and the fact that you can help someone solve a problem or achieve a task. You need to be confident that what you do will bring them value. This type of confidence is human, real and creates enthusiasm – and enthusiasm attracts people to do business with you.

- 4. You have to pay a lot of money to advertise to lots of people.** No you do not. Not necessarily. Admittedly, if you're selling Mars Bars, you'll need to sell millions to make it all stack up – so you need to advertise to millions. But if you're selling specialist professional services you actually only need to let people know you exist, tell them exactly what you do and clearly explain which of their problems you can solve.

The second two points should be fairly straight-forward (although objective help with getting your message straight and professional copywriting to say it effectively can be a very good investment). The first point – letting people know you exist – needs a little more planning; refer back to the questions in point 1. Common sense.

5. You need to know all about Facebook and Twitter to be able to market yourself and compete.

No you do not. You DO need to properly acknowledge the significance of social media in today's society – whether you personally use it or not – and accept the fact that it can make a big difference to the success or growth of your business. And you absolutely cannot afford to ignore it, because you can be sure that your competitors (the ones that matter) will be using it.

You can, however, easily invest in someone to train your business up, plan your social media marketing for you, or even take care of the whole lot for you. And that can be equally effective in terms of results. Just please, please, don't ignore it.

Are you ready?

Well, hopefully that's given you a bit of a confidence boost if you thought that you wouldn't be able to grow your business until you engaged in the dark arts of sales.

So what do you say? Are you ready and eager to approach this new type of sales? Are you ready to listen and to help and even to give stuff you value away?

If you are, then enjoy. The hard sell is behind you and this altogether nicer, more civilised approach stretches ahead of you, full of potential and opportunity. Wave good bye to your PowerPoint and punishing pitches. Roll up your shirt sleeves and get stuck in. Good luck.

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I help determined SMEs acquire the right new clients