Pick up the phone and build your pipeline

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Anthony Stears now seems to be known as "the telephone assassin". After watching the webinar he did for the National Sales Conference, here are some key takeaways that can help you improve your phone technique.

Stears started the session by emphasising that good manners are the essential starting point of all calls. The moment that prospects feel that you are aggressive, rude or too "salesy", you are lost. Instead, his mantra is "capitalise on the conversations that people are ready to have".

He breaks down his process into three main phases:

Phase 1: Build rapport

Stears compared his approach with dropping a pizza menu through someone's door. Popping it through the letter box is fine, but knocking on the door and asking if someone wants a pizza would be rude and weird.

Start with the objections: *"I was hoping to chat for a couple of minutes. I guess this isn't the most convenient time for a call; when would be a good time for me to call you back?"* You need permission to speak before you can go any further.

Once you've got a green light to go ahead, address the first objection head on:

"I appreciate that you're almost certainly not looking for training right now. I just want to make sure that we're on your radar when the time is right."

Remember, you're just dropping the menu through the letterbox, not trying to sell the pizza.

Before the call, make sure you've done your research, which you can then reference (within reason). Referring to their LinkedIn profile is fine, while talking about their Facebook page would be invasive.

It might also help to have the right expectations. As a general rule of thumb, out of 10 calls:

- 7 will go to voicemail or not be answered
- 2 will answer and re-schedule a better time
- 1 will answer and be ready to talk

Never leave a voicemail for someone who doesn't know who you are or what you're offering.

The goal is to build sufficient rapport that the other person likes you enough to listen to what you have to say.

Phase 2: Establish credibility

Relevant case studies that you can share to establish credibility are essential. As you prepare for your phone time, build a library of case studies that you can draw on, making sure they are about the client (not about you), and choosing something that the client can relate to. If you're talking to a medium-sized business, telling them about a blue-chip client might make them feel intimidated or that you don't really understand them and your offer is largely irrelevant.

On the other hand, sharing a story from a client who is just a few steps ahead of where your prospect is now, or who is dealing with similar issues, could spark curiosity.

Once your prospect's interest is piqued, send your client story as a PDF follow-up, including any details you have permission to share, with the clear expectation of a subsequent call to discuss: "*Do you think you'll have a chance to review this in the next couple of weeks? Could we set a time to speak then?"*

Always be in control of the next step.

Phase 3: Create urgency

Don't be aggressive on the follow-up call:
"I just wanted to check that my e-mail got through your spam filter."
not
"Have you had a chance to read the e-mail I sent you?"

The goal is to get the customer to "test drive" your product or service, so think about what that looks like in your industry. Is it a product sample, a software trial, a site visit?

Then, remember the 3 'P's: Polite, Persistent, Patient.

The most important thing, though, is to always follow up:

- 44% of salespeople give up after one follow-up
  but
- 80% of deals need a minimum of five follow-ups to get them over the line.

Stears wrapped up with an outline of his selling journey:

- Finding the name of the person to speak to;
- Successfully getting through to them;
- Reaching agreement to speak at a convenient time;
- Reaching agreement to review a testimonial on another call;
- Sending the testimonial;
- Calling to check that the testimonial got through;
- Offering a "test drive";
- Gaining customer agreement to the test drive.

Do you complete the same steps? Where in the cycle do you sometimes miss a step or get stuck? Knowing this might help you find a slight edge to improve your closed deals.

Q&A

At the end of the webinar, Stears responded to quite a few questions. Here are a few highlights:

What's the best way to introduce yourself?
Be polite and professional. Don't try to be overly friendly, and never start with "Hi there, how are you doing today?"

When's the best time to call?
The best time is NOW. And if that leads to finding a more convenient time later, that's fine. You can also try first thing in the morning, lunchtime, or the end of the day, when gatekeepers are less likely to screen you out.

How can you get past gatekeepers?
Never lie to get past - it's the worst possible way to start any relationship. Stears' technique is to imply intimacy without stating it. Here's an example call flow to illustrate:

- *"Hi, is Steve there ... Steve Lindsay?"* Implies that you are on first name terms, adding surname for clarity.
- *"Who shall I say is calling?"*
- *"Anthony Stears, S T E A R S. Thanks."* No company name again implies a personal call.
- *"What is the call about?"*
- *"Look, this is important but not urgent. When's a better time to call back?"* This puts the onus on the gatekeeper to put you through now or later. Stears' experience is that most gatekeepers fold at this point.

His advice is never to engage the gatekeepers or have them act as your intermediary for the pitch. It's better to keep calling back until you get past them.

Stears' sales pitch

Stears has a nice technique for building relationships with Heads of Training: he asks if he can interview them so he can quote their input when he's speaking at conferences. And, of course, he explores all the different training initiatives they have while interviewing them.

He offers a "free" Master Class as a test drive, and sets this up as follows:
- a 45-minute online webinar for the sales team
- nominally billed at £450
- he'll write off the invoice of he gets written feedback within 14 days

This achieves multiple objectives, framing the value of the training and establishing his credentials.

To discover more about telephone skills, let's talk growth.