

The importance of traditional follow-up in a nontraditional business world.

business issues

CALL ME, MAYBE?

BY RUSSELL TRAHAN

BRYAN WALKED INTO HIS OFFICE and flipped on the lights.

It had been one month since his presentation to an industry-leading executive team, and that morning was to be the date of their decision on whether to retain his firm. A look to the phone—no blinking light signifying a voicemail. A scroll through his Outlook inbox—nothing. Securing this contract was to be a pivotal moment in his career and a determining factor in his upward trajectory in his office.

The minutes turned to hours and no word, and the slight anxiety became increasingly worrisome. Bryan had covered his bases and kept in touch; just last week he engaged in some brief social media banter with the team's CFO. Simple enough to maintain an air of informality and ensure the lines of communication remained open.

His inbox dinged: it was the company's CFO.

"Bryan, we appreciate your proposal submission, but we have decided to go in another direction. We require more consistent interaction from our business partners, and while we scheduled today to finalize our decision, we had yet to hear from you in the interim. We wish you the best of luck."

The email hit him like a freight train. He had avoided a formal follow-up process in fear of seeming overeager or pressuring his prospect, but had maintained casual connections through his LinkedIn and Facebook accounts just to keep his name top-of-mind. While Bryan assumed the company would appreciate his distance while they were in the process of making their decision, it actually became the nail in his corporate coffin. They were awaiting his traditional methods of follow up, and his lack of correspondence instead conveyed that he was not the right man for the job.

In an ever-expanding digital business landscape, Bryan's story is all too familiar. Many working professionals are exchanging established means of follow up, such as phone calls and face-to-face meetings, for quick messages over social media or email, and it is impacting their business relationships and bottom lines. They sacrifice professional courtesy in an attempt to appear casual—and regardless of the many ways we can now communicate, when it comes to following up, the best practices are typically the traditional practices.

Digital Overreliance

Have you encountered a friend or relative that limits all contact with you to digital convenience? That one person who never fails to have a comment reserved for your timeline or feed, but you cannot recall the last time you actually *spoke*?

These individuals also exist in the business realm, and they've attempted to streamline their communication with an overkill-level reliance on their social media accounts.

It's not just a bad business practice; it's bad overall form. Social media can prove invaluable when creating connections, but maintaining them—as is the objective when conducting follow-up on a potential deal—should always be reserved for traditional modes of correspondence. Anything less borders on lazy and unprofessional.

Avoiding "Are We There Yet?"

Once you've curbed your inclination for social media-centric fol-

low up, there are parameters that should be adhered to when following up with leads. The first and most important is to establish an agenda when touching base with your prospects and ensuring that each subsequent call or meeting occurs under the umbrella of providing new information.

There should be a solid reason for picking up that phone and a distinct benefit to the individual on the other end of it. Any parent can describe road-trip trials and tribulations, and

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many of them will recall the maddening, constant cries of “Are we there yet?” from the back seat. That same irritated feeling occurs with continuous follow-up calls. There is a distinct difference between being attentive and being annoying—learn it, because your potential client is already well aware.

Two to Tango

Not only should you curb the impulse to flood your prospect with phone calls, you should actually give them the freedom to *lead* the interactions a bit. Allow them to dictate the follow-up flow by inquiring into their timeline and preference for the next call or meeting, and set a date.

Whether your next meeting is two weeks or two months away, your sales prospect has provided an appropriate date and time for your next meeting to occur. The onus is now on you to stick to the plan and pick up the phone.

Stay on Schedule

The genesis of the business salesperson always harkens to a time when a man in a pork pie hat would knock on door after door after door selling vacuums—the quintessential cold call. There is now a palpable aversion to following up with established sales leads in favor of “keeping things casual.”

This only leads to one thing: missed opportunity. Let your calendar hold you accountable. Prior to the end of a meeting or call, be sure to pencil in an appropriate time to follow up with your prospect, and stick to the date on the calendar. Keeping things casual may maintain pride, but it does not promote sales.

Back to Bryan, he was remiss with his follow up practices, and because of that, he lost out on an important deal for his company—and his professional growth. Lessons are often learned through unintended or unwanted consequences, and Bryan’s silver lining is that in that moving forward, he will make sure to devote the appropriate more energy and attention to the manner in which he follows up with prospective clients. ■