

## **Why Every Interaction with a Prospect is like a Cold Call**

**By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited**



*"The secret of man's success resides in his insight into the moods of people,  
and his tact in dealing with them."*

**J. G. Holland**

One of my clients—let's call him Peter—recently said to me: "Charlie, I don't get it. I was working on this potential key account for already three months. We had good rapport and I think he really liked what we could offer. So everything went really smoothly until about two weeks ago."

Peter is the sales director for Asia-Pacific of a major US-based logistics company and was very keen on getting this multi-national manufacturer of high-quality furniture to become one of his key accounts.

"So what happened?" I asked.

"Well, I tried to call Tom, my main contact person and one of the decision makers, several times but simply couldn't reach him. Either he was in meetings or said that it's not a good time to talk or he was on a trip and what not. I got the feeling that he was avoiding me, which didn't happen before and I have no idea why."

Sounds familiar? If so, you're not alone. If not, then you are either lucky or you don't need to read the remainder of this article because you already seem to get it always right.

After some closer analysis of this case we discovered that Tom indeed tried to avoid Peter because Tom's company was in final negotiations with another vendor. So Tom felt uncomfortable at this stage to talk to Peter because, on one hand, he couldn't give Peter a definite 'no' since the negotiations with the other vendor were not yet finalized. On the other hand, he didn't want to waste his time talking to Peter when chances were good that they would go for the other vendor.

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If there had been a deeper level of trust between Tom and Peter, perhaps Tom would have simply told Peter that they were negotiating with another party, but obviously Tom didn't feel sufficiently comfortable doing so.

In this article I don't want to elaborate further on the issue of trust and how it can be created. I wrote about trust in the July issue of this E-Zine, which you may access by visiting <http://www.progressu.com.hk/ezone-sales-2006-6.htm> .

My point is that Peter obviously didn't notice an important shift in the buying process of his prospect. How could he have known?

There are two possible scenarios:

- 1) Something happened during Peter's last conversation with Tom; and/or
- 2) Something happened after Peter's last conversation with Tom.

When we continuously interact with prospects or anyone for that matter, we tend to assume that we can continue our interaction from the point where we left it the last time we communicated. Unfortunately, this assumption often misleads us because we are not sufficiently sensitive to any changes that might have happened outside our 'radar'. Consequently, it's highly recommended to treat every interaction with a prospect like a cold call.

In a cold call, by definition, we don't know much about the party we are calling and the other party typically knows even less about us. That's what makes cold calls so challenging. To carry it out successfully, we need to be very sensitive to the prospect's current (!) situation and avoid any biases from the little information we have.

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Knowing that the situation of the prospect can change without us noticing, wouldn't it be useful to be equally unbiased and sensitive like in a cold call in every interaction with the prospect? If you are, then chances are good that you will get insights into such changes that will allow you to adjust accordingly. Or you will realize that due to these changes what you are offering might not be a really good solution for the buyer anymore. This would be an important and useful realization, too, as you could quit the process with dignity and avoid wasting your time.

Now let's look at the second scenario. What can we do if we are avoided by the prospect? If you have ever done a fair number of cold calls, then you are very likely to have experienced exactly this pattern of being avoided.

I've found that what works best in this kind of situation is to 'actively pull back'. What I mean is to either send an email or leave a message along these lines: "I recently tried a few times to get in touch with you but obviously wasn't successful. Maybe it is because of something I said the last time we spoke or because you got the impression that our services are not a good match for you. I certainly don't want to create any inconvenience to you and therefore won't make any further attempts to contact you at this time. Of course, I would be happy to hear from you but I won't take it personally if I don't because I'm sure you would have good reasons for that."

If this sounds to you like giving up, then I appreciate your point of view. In my experience, however, I have seen this work quite well. I would frequently get a response with either an explanation why we are not in the game anymore or that they simply were pre-occupied with other more urgent issues. In both cases I got the chance to discuss if any further action from my side would still make sense.

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In the case of Peter it turned out that he didn't notice during his past conversation with Tom that the latter's key buying criteria had changed. Tom gave some hints to Peter, who more or less ignored them and was intent on continuing his selling process which he saw already close to conclusion. Obviously, Tom was put off by Peter's inflexibility and chose to go with another vendor who was more willing to adjust to Tom's new situation.

**Conclusion:** It is useful to see any interaction with a prospect like a cold call, i.e. not to take anything for granted, to be ready that we may not be able to pick up the conversation where we left it the last time we communicated with the prospect. If we feel that the buyer tends to avoid us, then it is often useful to 'actively pull back', i.e. pro-actively suggest that we pull out of the process while remaining open to any positive response from the prospect.



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to achieve a positive change of the image of sales. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

In 2004, Charlie initiated the Master Coach Alliance ( see <http://www.master-coach-alliance.com> ) in Hong Kong, a network of professional Life, Business and Corporate Coaches. End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" ( see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm> ) which got published in August 2005. Charlie wrote over 100 articles since 2003 and over 20 of them got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive and CareerTimes.

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