

Sales Process: We're Only As Good As Our Next Step

by Alan Rigg

No sale can be counted upon unless the prospect is **actively engaged** in the sales cycle. What does it mean to be "actively engaged"? This is defined by the prospect's willingness to commit to a **next step**.

What is a valid next step?

A valid next step is a specific, **scheduled** appointment with an **agenda** designed to move the sale closer to "closed". The appointment may be in person or via the telephone, but **it must be on the prospect's calendar**. Plus, the salesperson must have an agenda to **advance** the sale, not merely check the status of the prospect's decision process. Finally, the purpose of the call **cannot** be to schedule a future substantive discussion.

While there is no guarantee that an opportunity that meets these conditions will close, the chances of securing revenue from an actively engaged prospect are far greater than the chances of securing revenue from a prospect that refuses to commit to a next step.

It is human nature for salespeople to maintain unrealistically hopeful feelings regarding contacts who are willing to talk with them on a regular basis. Often they concentrate their efforts on these contacts under the guise of "relationship building." **Unfortunately, most relationship building is nothing more than the passage of time.**

If discussions and meetings are not specifically designed to **advance** sales opportunities, they usually are not very productive. So, while salespeople should maintain positive attitudes, to be successful they also need to be very **realistic**.

Salespeople can use this simple rule to validate whether or not a prospect is truly "hot"

At the end of every prospect meeting, the salesperson should determine if there is a reason to meet again.

If there seems to be a reason to continue, the salesperson should attempt to **schedule the next appointment BEFORE leaving the meeting.**

This approach has two advantages:

1. If a prospect is truly interested in moving forward, he or she will readily grant the salesperson more time and schedule it in his or her own calendar. If the prospect does **NOT** want to continue the sale, he or she will hesitate to schedule more time.

Too often a prospect will say, "Call me next week to schedule our next appointment." This is often used as a way to get the salesperson out of their office. Every salesperson has experienced prospects saying these very words, then not returning telephone calls the following week.

Some salespeople are reluctant to ask for a next step for fear that the answer is going to be "no". These salespeople are only creating **false hopes**, which **do NOT generate sales**.

2. Putting a next appointment on the calendar before the current meeting ends ensures **it can take place in a timely manner**. Why is this important? Schedules can fill up, even if the follow-up scheduling call takes place just a few days later.

By scheduling the next appointment **before** leaving the current appointment, a salesperson can come back to the prospect in the shortest possible time. **The benefit of this is shorter sales cycles.**

It is important to emphasize that next steps need to be structured to **productively advance a sale**. A scheduled visit to "check the status of things" or to "see if they are willing to consider our company" is **NOT** a valid next step!

Additionally, any scheduled next step **must be within the normal sales cycle**. A prospect that agrees to receive a call on a date outside the normal sales cycle cannot be seen to be actively working toward a purchase (though of course these calls DO deserve follow-up).

When these "Next Step" rules are followed exactly, it is not unusual to see that just a small percentage of the opportunities currently being worked by a sales team meet the criteria. This is entirely intentional!

The simple truth is that prospects for which valid next steps have been scheduled have a much greater likelihood of purchasing. **These are the "real" opportunities.** Tracking the number of "real" opportunities in each phase of the sales cycle will tell managers whether salespeople have enough potential business in their current pipelines to ensure future success.

By categorizing opportunities in this manner:

- Salespeople and managers will be able to **separate reality from fiction and opinions from fact**
- Managers will be able to **assist salespeople with the prospects that truly matter**
- Managers will be able to **set salesperson prospecting activity expectations** at a level that will ensure sufficient concurrent "live" prospects to produce consistent success
- Salespeople and managers will be able to **provide more accurate forecasts**

Remember, time is your only inventory!

Don't waste your time chasing prospects that are not serious about buying your products or services. Use the "next step" test to validate whether or not an opportunity you are pursuing is a **REAL** opportunity.

If the prospect is willing to schedule a **next meeting** on a **specific date** at a **specific time** with a **specific agenda** for **advancing** the sales cycle, you have a **real** prospect. If your prospect is not willing to make this kind of commitment, you need to question how serious they really are...and spend more time finding real prospects!