

The 3 Pillars of More Effective B2B Sales and Marketing (and Our Mindless Obsession with Lists)

By Jeff Josephson

Several years ago when I was doing research for my book on how to make cold calls (“The Most Powerful Weapon in Your Marketing Arsenal”), I ran into a number of so-called “tricks of the trade” on the subject. Everywhere I looked there were lists of skills, techniques and solutions that were designed to help the professional B2B telemarketer become more effective on the phones. Since I was writing a 400-page book containing the collective wisdom of dozens of people who together had several hundred years of successful B2B telemarketing experience, here’s how I responded (being deliberately sarcastic) at the time:

Tricks of the trade also include “The Seven Steps to Better Cold Calling,” and its cousins “The Three Steps to Better Cold Calling,” “The Four Steps to Better Cold Calling,” and “The Five Steps to Better Cold Calling;” as if there were actually a formula for it. But given that if you Google the words “Steps to Better Cold Calling” you get over 100,000,000 hits, you might justifiably wonder which one is right.

The point I was making, of course, is that you can’t describe what it takes to make effective cold calls with a simple list of tips. This is because making effective cold calls requires attributes like a fundamental understanding of human behavior. And it requires the ability to ask good questions, and only enough product knowledge to be dangerous, among other things. This, of course, is not intended to be an exhaustive list. But more importantly, none of what you need to know could possibly be packaged into a simple laundry list called “The X Steps to Better Cold Calling”.

If you’re going to learn how to make good cold calls, it requires months of training, a few innate personality traits, and ongoing diligence and coaching. That was the main reason why I wrote the book: to impart the rather complex knowledge base we had on the subject (primarily for our employees). But I set aside the question of why people feel so compelled to create these mindless laundry lists – which insist on oversimplifying what are often very complex concepts – for another day.

While the Mindless Laundry List has deep roots in modern management, it actually found its

apotheosis in Chinese culture. I read somewhere (and I’ll have to find the citation) that the Chinese love these kinds of lists, and when the Communists took over, it was the one propaganda tool they took with them from the Middle Kingdom. And, of course, there’s a belief that, if you want people to remember what you’re saying, or even listen to you, you need to put it in a clear, concise list format. In fact, if you want to get published today, it’s said that you have to bulletize your thoughts (KISS!) Otherwise, editors (most of whom, by the way, never built a business themselves) will tell you, people won’t read it.

I was reminded of this tendency for people to be seduced by the Mindless Laundry List when I was putting together a promotional program for my company. I wanted to get some material published, and everyone was telling me that I needed to get my content into a list form (i.e. as a list of handy-dandy tips on how to do something important in marketing) that an editor would find to be relevant, and easy to publish. The idea, of course, is that people don’t have time to read 400 page books. People, especially today, supposedly have short attention spans. And so you shouldn’t write anything that the reader can’t get through in one visit to the bathroom.

I get reminded of this all the time whenever I draft a direct mail piece for a client. They insist that it shouldn’t be longer than one page when I hand them something that’s six. Never mind that the most successful direct mail program in history is the Publisher’s Clearing House promotion, which runs to almost 20 pages. And never mind that one of the most effective executive selling techniques, described in a book by Michael Boylan called “The Power to Get In,” includes writing a letter that averages four pages. People have this prejudice that no one will read what you’ve written if it’s too long (except, actually, unless they want to).

I was also reminded of this the other day when I ran into the work of a fairly prominent business writer whose beat was B2B sales and marketing. Among his postings were the following:

- 8 Sentences that Drive Bosses Crazy
- 8 Ways to Improve Your Attitude
- 10 Dumb Things Bosses Say (and What to Say Instead)

- 6 Classic Cold Call Mistakes
- 7 Reasons the Customer Is Often Wrong
- 4 Dirty Negotiating Tricks
- 4 Types of Basic Value Propositions
- The 4 Levels of B2B Selling
- 10 Rules for Better Product Demos
- The Top 3 Ways Marketers Waste Money
- 6 Sales Questions You're Afraid to Ask
- 10 Beliefs of Top Salespeople
- 5 Ways to Get and Keep Motivated
- 5 Ways to Become Inspired and Engaged
- 5 Dumb Myths About Start-Ups
- 7 Fairly Useless, High-Paying Jobs
- 8 Reasons Companies Buy From You
- 7 Deadly Sins of Top Sales Teams
- 7 Workplace Shortcuts You Need to Know

This list of articles (with an occasional entry that wasn't strictly in list form) went on, would you believe, for over 30 pages!

Anyway, while it may be true that no one will read what you've written if it's not in bullet form, the fact is that what you end up with is usually garbage – what I refer to as the “Junk Food” of knowledge. It tastes good, and it's cheap, but it isn't very healthy for you, or for your business. Because if you believe that you can solve your problems with what's contained in one (or even a hundred) of these Mindless Laundry Lists, unless it's the 10 Commandments, you're dreaming.

Perhaps people are starting to realize that these Mindless Laundry Lists don't actually impart useful (nor certainly complete) information, as demonstrated by the rise of the infographic. That is, if you can only get a handful of concepts into a list, and you need to show more, create an infographic. Engaging the reader with fonts and arrows, the infographic bows to the reality that some concepts are just too complex to be put into a few short sentences. But is it really an improvement? Or, notwithstanding how terribly difficult it is to actually put a good infographic together, is it just another way to avoid the fact that your audience either:

- Doesn't care about what you have to say
- Is too lazy to learn what they really need to know in order to solve the problem
- Doesn't really have a problem to solve, or
- Only really wants to be entertained.

In any event, given this plethora of lists, tools and mind maps, you would think that, if you memorized all of the available Mindless Laundry Lists, you might be granted, say, an Executive MBA. And that, by the

way, is *exactly* what you're boss is thinking when he tells you to read them. (“All I need to do is give Jeff this one more set of tips and he'll go from being a useless payroll suck to being a star!”)

Of course, you're not so gullible as to believe that success (either yours or your employees') can be found in the next Mindless Laundry List you read, are you? But look at what passes for content on LinkedIn, and you'll quickly get the impression that someone's trying to get something over on you. And you'd be right.

To be sure, you can't use the excuse that the Mindless Laundry list is just a teaser designed to get you to engage with the author. Or that it's a commercial designed to get your attention, and eventually buy the product. It's not. People don't use them that way. They take them literally. How do you know? Ask yourself:

- If you're an editor, which is more important to you? If someone reads your blog, or if they click through to your source?
- If you're the author, what is your ratio of impressions to closes?
- And if you're a reader of a Mindless Laundry List, how often do you call the author and ask for personalized help, and pay for it?

Look, the fact is that business problems are complex, and you're not going to find a solution to *anything* in a Mindless Laundry List, or in a hundred of them either. That doesn't mean that the only thing that can solve your problem is an MBA. But it does mean that problems have to be analyzed, and that you have to develop solutions, test them, and refine them. There are no shortcuts.

So with that as background, here are our 3 pillars of more effective B2B sales and marketing:

Step 1: Analyze the Problem

If it's a demand problem, do some market research. If it's a personnel problem, do some observational studies. If it's a data problem do a systems analysis. And if it's an execution problem, study the workflow. Whatever the problem is, solving it starts with a thorough and rational Situation Analysis.

And if you can't do the analysis yourself, hire an expert. If the problem is big enough, it's worth the expense. If it's not, live with it. Don't delude yourself into thinking that someone is going to solve your problem with a Mindless Laundry List.

Step 2: Develop Results, Conclusions and Recommendations

Resist the temptation to jump to conclusions when you see the data from step 1. Instead, analyze it with a valid statistical methodology. This is because if you're going to draw conclusions, it helps to be able to defend them, of course. And when you make recommendations, it's better to base them on what's most likely to work, not on anecdotes, or on whatever just sounds good.

In most cases, it pays to implement your recommendations on a small scale. Test them. And if they work, scale them up. Then test them again. And if they don't work, go back to Step 1.

Step 3: Ignore Mindless Laundry Lists

And if you're looking for something to read in the bathroom, try the crossword puzzle.