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Never call your customers

If calling your customers is part of your sales plan, think again. Research shows phoning customers is outdated, intrusive and most importantly, nothing but a waste of time.

Kate Jones

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If calling your customers is part of your sales plan, think again. Research shows phoning customers is outdated, intrusive and most importantly, nothing but a waste of time.

Although picking up the phone may be the simplest and most direct way to get in touch with customers, it can also be incredibly detrimental to your business.



Cian Mcloughlin predicts the death of telemarketing.

A survey by advice site Hello Operator found customers often felt rage when they answered a sales call, primarily because they felt the



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caller was reading from a script and they were being treated impersonally.

Sales consultancy Trinity Perspectives' chief executive Cian McLoughlin says customers' high frustration levels have made telemarketing a dying sales technique.

"In the past 10 to 15 years it's become less common and with so many countries around the world having 'do not call' registries, I think it's a pretty damning indictment on telemarketing," he says.

Australians detest sales calls so much that more than 9 million phone numbers have been listed on the "do not call" register, latest data from the Australian Communications and Media Authority shows.



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Yet a survey by The Australian Institute found Australians spend an average of 147 minutes on telemarketing calls each year.

Calling customers is not only a bad sales move, says McLoughlin, but a bad brand strategy.

"If you're picking up the phone and dialling, it's not good for your credibility or long term brand viability," he says.

"You risk calling at the wrong time, when people are having dinner or putting the kids to bed. In fact, there's almost never an appropriate time to receive a cold-call because invariably people will launch into a pitch and that's off-putting and annoying."

Invasive cold-calling was ranked the most hated prospecting technique in a 2012 survey by marketing company CR Cards.

Preferred methods were email contact, followed by face-to-face networking and direct mail.

Cheap Sheds owner Krisztian Panczel said calling customers to make a sale was a big no-no for today's small business owner.

"People are more and more particular about not being called about this and that and their privacy, so we're much better off getting customers coming to us rather than the other way around," he says.

"It's important to get the customer and merchant relationship started off on the right foot."

The secret of attracting customers lies in informing them, says Panczel. In 2010 Cheap Sheds started an online education campaign, which included a blog and videos.

"People know when you're trying to sell them something and we're

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the company that doesn't want to sell anything, we just want to educate them about their options so that they make up their own mind about their purchase," he said.

Pancel says 15 per cent of people who use online education tools go on to make a purchase. This is supported by research by marketing firm HubSpot revealing companies who prioritise blogging are 13 times more likely to enjoy positive return on investment.

Business directory Jobs and Services owner Ronan Bray swears by the results of contacting customers by SMS.

"I did consider cold-calling but I'm a marketing manager in my nine-to-five job and I'm very against cold-calling, as most people are, so I went against that," he says.

"So instead of calling I went for cold-SMSing and it's been very successful."

Bray text-messaged more than 2500 customers as part of a multi-pronged marketing approach that helped him attract more than 500 businesses, 40,000 page visits and 3400 Facebook followers.

Hang up the phone and try these more successful marketing techniques:

Harness social media

Develop a strategy based around your customer demographic, says McLoughlin.

"Harnessing the power of social media doesn't just mean opening a Facebook and Twitter account or throwing loads of money at it," he says.

"Social media has huge potential for small businesses that develop an effective strategy."

Customer referrals

The most successful sales leads are those made by happy customers.

Pancel estimates between 25 and 27 per cent of his sales are generated from referrals.

"It costs little just to maintain a high level of customer service," he says.

Blog

Keep your customers informed and anticipate their questions by publishing regular blog entries on your business website.

"It's an unbelievable way of building leverage and reaching customers you want to target," says McLoughlin.