



Stop giving cold calls the cold shoulder Strengthen your abilities to make initial calls to prospects.

By Anne Scarlett, printed in *Modern Steel Construction*

Ask a technical professional about their least favorite marketing task, and you'll find that cold-calling often tops the list. I can relate to why many of you put telephone prospecting at the bottom of your to-do list. Even with almost 20 years of warm-/cold-calling experience, I am still not a big fan.

But let's get something straight: you cannot use your technical background as an excuse for lackluster cold-calling abilities. I myself have an interior architecture degree, and my colleague John Ross, business development director at Affiliated Engineers, Inc., is an engineer—and we make cold calls. So, now that we've eliminated that excuse, let's take a look at some techniques I have compiled, with John's additional insights.

What's your hook? Share your hook within the first 20 seconds of the call. "Wow" factors about your firm's performance may work, such as remarkable statistics relating to project results. But if they are not compelling or if you can't support your claims with facts, then go for a different type of attention-getter: name a mutual colleague, reference an organization to which you are both involved, inquire about news regarding the contact's organization or industry, or make an observation on what you've read about the prospect from a reliable source, such as LinkedIn. John finds that mentioning a few highly respected existing clients seems to pique immediate interest. One of my own favorite hooks involves expressing my desire to hear the prospect's opinion on relevant subjects. People like to feel valued; they will likely engage in a comfortable rapport when they realize that you seek their perspective. Each call is different, so select a pre-developed hook in order to capture attention from the get-go, and brainstorm with colleagues about various hook options.

You've got their attention; what do you want from them? Clearly state your purpose up-front. Time is tight, and meandering and mindless chit-chat will not be welcomed. This is not to say that you can't be playful and relaxed as the conversation evolves, but put yourself in their shoes; it's more palatable to have clarity on what someone wants from you than to be suspicious of hidden agendas. Further, by directly stating your intention, you will confirm whether you have reached the right person or if you need to speak with someone else. If you are passed along, keep track of everyone that you spoke with so that you can map an organizational chart. You never know when those other people may come in handy.

Match their communication style. It's important to match the delivery of the prospect, at least during the first couple of minutes. If they answer the phone in a curt manner, be somewhat brisk in your own response. Just last week I received a call from a prospect; she had found me on the web. Yes, it was easier because she initiated the call, but I still needed to be at my best in order to promote my services. Interestingly, I caught myself a couple of times showing an unbalanced level of energy compared to her tone and rate of speaking. While highly articulate and content-rich, she was soft-spoken in her delivery style. She was thoughtful, pensive. On the one hand, I wanted to demonstrate my high-energy personality, which would be fitting for what she needed (marketing training for her technical staff). On the other hand, I did not want to alienate her, even subconsciously, because of differing styles. After I hung up from that first 30-minute call, I vowed that during the next conversation I would be extra mindful to be in-line with her. Sure enough, our next call felt much more balanced. (And incidentally, I was awarded her business!)

Agree on the next step. I personally like to agree upon a next step fairly quickly within the call and then sign off. Conversely, some business development colleagues see value in building a longer rapport by phone. Either way, never conclude a call without agreeing on a next step. For me, my next desired step is typically to schedule a face-to-face meeting, although there are times when I'm simply calling to remain top-of-mind. When possible, keep the ball in your court. If you agree to send information, state that you'll follow up within a specified time frame. John likes to send a subtle "no-pressure" message after an initial call. When the prospect asks, "Why don't you check in with me again in a couple of months?" John will suggest a date that is about four months out. Often, the client will back it up and say specifically that they'd like to hear from him again in one to two months.

Show respect; ask about a preferred form of contact. First, get permission to follow up by e-mail immediately after the call so that they will have all your contact information. (Make sure your e-mail signature includes your mailing address, web site, and direct phone number.) Then, ask if they prefer to correspond via e-mail or by phone. Some people have strong opinions one way or another; they will be appreciative when you respect their preferences.

Voicemails: to leave or not to leave. Many people suggest avoiding voicemail messages. Instead, try to obtain the direct dial digits and attempt calls until you connect. Many leaders, aka decision-makers, have Type-A personalities, so you may also want to try them on off-hours such as early mornings or weekends. My approach is different. I actually prefer to leave a voicemail as a first form of phone contact. Here's why: A well-executed voicemail allows you to express your point with succinct confidence, minus any sense of resistance from the other end of the line. By practicing your voicemail delivery in advance to ensure an interesting, appropriately dynamic delivery, you can be sure that your message will be heard fully. At the end of the message, recap the nature of your call, repeat your full name, and state your phone number twice. Although you may not receive a return call, take comfort in knowing that when you call back again—don't leave another message until you reach the person live—that the contact will already have a cursory knowledge of who you are and what you want with them. In my view, leaving a good voicemail can work just like a direct mail piece because it prompts a familiarity with your brand. Take note, sometimes you will be able to redo your message. Every phone system is different, but often if you hit the pound sign you will have an opportunity to listen to—and re-record—your message. Once you figure out the coding for the prospect's phone system, include it within your calling notes for future reference.

As you can see, there are varying views on the "right" way to successfully execute cold/warm calls. What's most important is that you find your own right way. As you hit upon success—no matter how large (winning a new project) or how small (securing a meeting)—you will be on the way to becoming a skilled caller.