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### Three Ways to Improve Your Lead-Nurturing Strategy

by Kathy Rizzo

Although more than 80% of high-tech marketers say they have a lead-nurturing strategy, 64% say their strategy needs improvement, according to a February 2008 survey by TeleNet Marketing Solutions.

As for which areas of overall lead-generation strategy tech marketers would like to improve in the next year, nurturing of long-term leads was the No. 1 response.

Nurturing shortens the sales cycle and improves return on investment from lead-generation activities, so it is important to reconsider your nurturing strategy frequently. Consider the following three recommendations to enhance your strategy.

#### 1. Add or enhance human-touch strategies

When developing a lasting business relationship, it is critical to engage in verbal communication not only to exchange information but also to build trust. Legitimate relationships are an important part of business—critically important when selling a service or solution. If you rely solely on electronic-based communication to nurture prospects, you are missing a vital element.

Consider the definition of lead nurturing: In a complex sales cycle, nurturing is a relationship-building approach utilizing multiple media to provide relevant information to prospects and engage in an ongoing dialog until qualified prospects are deemed "sales ready."

Another way of looking at the value of human touch is to consider the opportunities missed simply because the prospect is too busy to search the Internet for your company's content or download a whitepaper or respond to your email.

However, if you personally reach out to prospects via well-timed phone calls, you make it easier for your prospect to focus on the problem and take action. This is especially true when the telephone calls are relevant and focused, providing value to the prospect.

Here are three items to consider when you add or enhance a telemarketing (human-touch) nurturing approach.

#### **A. Contact prospects at the opportune time:**

Always look for direction from your prospect (e.g., "Please call me back in two weeks").

When appropriate, recommend the next phone call based on the buying stage of the prospect. These intervals can be predetermined for each buying stage, making it easy to recommend the next phone call ("C" rated leads are contacted in 30 day intervals, "D" rated leads are contacted in 60 days intervals, etc.).

Consider the receptiveness of prospects. If they are receptive to new information and frequent communication, shorten the intervals between phone calls. Do not try to force all prospects into the same contact strategy.

Look for triggering events. Newsworthy events such as a major acquisition may serve as an opportune time to contact a prospect.

#### **B. Train your team on the four goals of each telemarketing contact:**

1. Only provide prospects information that is deemed valuable and relevant.
2. Expand prospects' profile by learning more about their current situation and environment. Get them talking!
3. Continue to learn about changing business priorities and critical issues that will affect purchase plans.
4. Determine whether a prospect is "sales ready."

#### **C. Be strategic and think before dialing:**

Think about the extent of the prospect's previous interaction with your company.

Consider details of prior nurturing practices—conversations, e-communications, content downloaded, events, etc.

What do you already know about the prospect's situation?

What else does your sales representative need to know in order to successfully engage in the sales process with this prospect?

How can you be valuable to the prospect?

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A nurturing telemarketing call is very different from a tele-qualification phone call. When integrating telemarketing into a nurturing strategy, pay special attention to the required skill level of your agents. Because calls are not scripted, the agents must be trained on your solution, understand buyer challenges, and have adequate content to convey value to the prospects.

Most importantly, agents should have excellent communication skills; if they do, prospects will view your company as a credible source and viable solution for their business situation.

## 2. Get back to the basics with your email strategy

Email is an important part of any nurturing strategy. While you can integrate graphic-rich emails into the strategy, it is worthwhile to also include periodic text emails that appear as personalized communication to your prospect.

Develop plain-text email templates that are perceived as relevant and individualized and do not come across as mass advertising.

Create templates that are easily customized by your nurturing team. Messages can be emailed to strategic groups of contacts (e.g., prospects in a specific industry) or sent on a case-by-case basis.

As you create the email templates...

**Keep the text short and limit the information.** Many people do a quick scan of their messages in the preview window before opening them, so make the message brief. Be mindful about the amount of information you provide. If you offer all possible information up front, there is little reason for prospects to speak with you. The key is to give just enough relevant information to pique their interest and desire to continue a dialogue with your company.

**Tie your message into a common business issue.** Personalize your message to your prospect's industry or job function by stating a unique business issue that they likely face. For instance, "Being in a services industry presents unique challenges such as..." This shows prospects that you understand their situation and are talking directly to them.

**Reference past contact.** Whether following up with a prospect because they downloaded a whitepaper or because of a previous conversation, the email should reference the last contact (including the date, if available). This catches the attention of the prospect and acts as a reminder of their previous interest. Examples: "Based on our conversation on March 16" or "Last week you downloaded our special whitepaper titled..."

**Build on your human touch.** It is important to have emails come from the persons providing human-touch telemarketing. This tactic helps build the relationship and allows your prospects to identify with a real person within your company. Prospects do not develop relationships with companies, they develop relationships with individuals in those companies.

## 3. Develop a scorecard to measure effort and ensure the appropriate focus

Every touch is not created equal. Many companies develop scorecards to assess sales-readiness (budget, authority, need, timeframe). While that's an effective use of scoring, it's also recommended that you develop a "nurturing touch" scoring system, whereby a numeric value is assigned to each type of touch (conversation, strategic voicemail, email, mailed fulfillment, etc.).

When creating the scoring system, consider the following:

**Expense of the touch.** For instance, a one-on-one conversation is typically the most expensive, so it receives the highest score. Conversely, a text email is less expensive and receives a lower score.

**Impact of the touch.** A one-on-one conversation provides the most impact, as information is given and received simultaneously. On the other hand, text emails are read only 40-60% of the time, with a small number resulting in immediate two-way communication.

In this example, the scoring system may give a numeric value of "4" to every conversation and "2" to every email, which accounts for the difference in both the expense and the impact of the two types of touches. By placing a simple score on

each touch, you can start to monitor the average score (or effort) required to nurture a "sales-ready" lead.

Prospects should not be engaged in the nurturing process indefinitely. By creating a scoring system, you can evaluate when a prospect reaches a point of diminishing returns. For instance, you may determine that the average score to create a sales-ready lead is 35 points. Use this intelligence to review prospects that are in your nurturing system; those with a very high score can either be removed from the nurturing system or flagged to receive only lower-cost communication.

Keep nurturing activities focused on the most suitable prospects to ensure the success of your program.



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