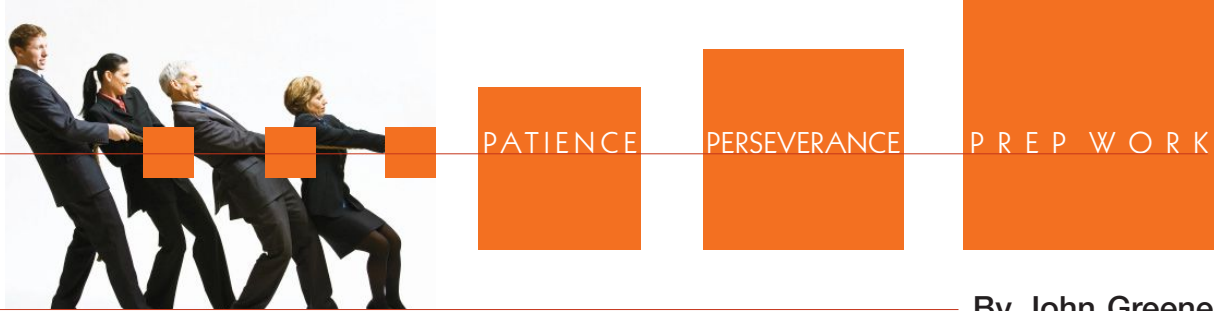


From Prospect to Customer:

PATIENCE, PERSEVERANCE, AND PREP WORK



By John Greene

In the past 20 years, has there been a more remarkable device to come down the technological track than the GPS? Think about it. Thanks to this small electronic box sitting on a dashboard, and two tons of metal circling the planet 12,000 miles in the sky, your chauffeur will be less likely to get lost. It's pretty much a lock that a GPS will get the customer in your backseat from point A to point B.

But for all its high-tech sophistication, what a GPS can't do is get that same customer from being just a name on a prospect list into the backseat of your car. For that little trip, it's all up to you. And if you get "lost" on this trip, you might find yourself out of business.

Like any industry, we need to be constantly hunting down new prospects whom we can convert into clients to feed the machine that is our livelihood. Companies that sit back and rely on just their current clientele, traditional forms of advertising, or

clients ... now what? Put them all on your speed dial and start cold calling? Leave fliers under their windshield wipers in the company garage? Absolutely, but only if you want to get hit with a restraining order.

What you want to do, and the first step that doesn't involve a court appearance, is to use what an old friend once called "magnet marketing," which is to bring customers to you instead of you going to them. And the way to do this is let them know a little about your company right off the bat. Send them your company newsletter, put them on your e-blast or e-bulletin list, drop them a postcard, link them to articles you have written for magazines—or to articles magazines have written about your company. Tell them about any awards you've won, industry associations you belong to, your good work in the community, and why you have gone "green." But don't overload the prospect with too much information—it has to be relevant to them. He or she

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a website will eventually find themselves in a bind. Even solid customers can fall victim to any number of nightmare scenarios: a company gets bought or sold, people get transferred, your best client's cousin starts a limo company, etc.

Tracking down lists of potential clients isn't all that hard. You can join any number of groups and business travel and meeting associations, even the local chamber of commerce, and immediately have access to a list of businesses that may need your services. You can also put yourself out on the social highway and flag down some names through LinkedIn or Facebook. And, finally, you can take the easy route (note, I did not say "lazy" route) and buy contact names from a list company that probably has the ability to drill down to something as specific as "companies with CEOs that order black coffee with two sugars in the Dunkin Donuts drive thru," just to make sure you get the leads you want.

Okay, so you have a list of a gazillion names of potential

probably doesn't care that your high school senior class voted you the most likely to start a limousine company. And never, ever badmouth the competition, even if you know you are better than they are. It won't work and it will definitely leave a bad taste in the mouths of potential customers. Always take the high road.

Remember, going after prospects is like a battle, but it shouldn't be a sneak attack. You want them to know who you are and that you are coming their way. Let them see the whites of your eyes as you go after the green in their budgets.

If you've done everything correctly, there's a good chance you might get a face-to-face meeting. But don't assume it will be with a decision maker. In the good old days, that person would have been the company president's executive assistant or the company's travel manager. But in the era of corporate downsizing, a lot of travel decisions are being made in the procurement department. This means the person who now orders ground

transportation has probably just got off the phone from ordering a box of paper clips and those plastic mats that go under office chairs from Staples.

But either way, if you get a face to face, make the most of it. Think of this as an opportunity to educate them and show how you can benefit the people who need ground transportation in their company. Right away establish how much time you are being allotted. You don't want to be halfway through your sales meeting and have the prospect looking at their watch or checking their

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schedule on an iPhone. Ask the important questions up front: What do you like most about the company you are using? If you had to change one thing about the company, what would it be? What factors do you use when choosing a ground transportation company? And in the Internet age there is no excuse to not know everything there is to know about a prospective client. If your first

question is, “So, Mr. Smith, tell me a little bit about your company,” the answer you will hear is the sound of the door shutting behind you. You must do your research before you sit down for that meeting or else you are wasting your and the prospective client's time.

In a recent issue of *Forbes*, a writer outlined what she felt was the ideal way to conduct an interview with a prospective customer, and it's good advice.

1. Don't use the word 'pitch'; call it a 'recommendation' so prospects know you want to engage in a conversation and help them.
2. Ask questions, listen to the prospect, and offer them a solution to the problem.
3. An effective sales pitch isn't a monologue, it's a dialogue.
4. Do your homework. Know enough about your buyer so you can address how your service can benefit that specific client.
5. Identify your objectives. Your goal is to get the prospect's attention and agreement to have a discussion about how you can help them with something specific.



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6. Begin the meeting by asking questions to uncover and understand the prospect's needs.

7. Talk 20 percent of the time and listen the other 80 percent. Identify the problems you can solve, the opportunities you can capture, and the wants or needs that are addressed by the solution.

8. Show metrics and proof of what you can do or have done in the past.

9. Use the prospect's language. Ask about a difficulty or challenge they have and address it in your recommendation using their exact language.

10. Ask for a commitment at the end of the conversation.

Once you have the green light to submit an RFP, do it in a timely fashion. Make sure it is 100 percent complete and accurate, and that the pricing is in line with industry standards (trust me, the client will also be doing their homework). Giving a quote is like walking a tightrope: lean a little to the left and you could under-price yourself, a little to the right and you'll price yourself out of the running.

But most importantly, make sure you can handle what you

are proposing and that you can deliver on your promise. The client is taking a leap of faith should they choose your company. You have to imagine your company as a giant bungee cord tied to that client's trust. Make sure you can do what you say you will do.

Finally, be sure to follow up with the prospect. Make sure to be persistent without being a stalker. And be patient, it took me almost 8 years to land one of my biggest accounts. In the words of that immortal songwriter, Ringo Starr: "It don't come easy." But when it comes, you'll see it was well worth the wait.

Whatever you do, don't pat yourself on the back for too long. After all, there are still other names on the list that need a ride somewhere. **LD**



John Greene is a 25-year veteran of the limousine business, and president and CEO of ETS International in Randolph, Mass. The company was recently chosen as "Limousine Operator of the Year" and was winner of the "Image Award" at The 2011 Limo Digest Show. He can be contacted at jgreene@etsintl.net.

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