

Lying to Get Past the Gatekeeper: 3 True Tales of Deception Your Firm Should Learn From

Over the past few weeks, I've found myself on the receiving end of a series of particularly heinous sales techniques—all of which were aimed at getting through a gatekeeper to a decision maker, and all of which ended disastrously for the business developer involved.

I firmly believe that, to improve our skills and the relationships we have with our prospects and clients, it's just as important to know what not to do as it is to know what to do. In that spirit, I decided to recount and dissect these painful experiences, in the hope of sharing with you where these sales people went so wrong—and what they could've done instead.

(One word of warning: while I've chosen not to use any names in order to protect the potentially innocent companies who may be employing these sales reps, and may not be aware of the "techniques" they are using, the stories you're about to read are, unfortunately, all true.)

#1: The Case of the Anonymous Acquaintance

First, a couple of weeks ago, I received a magazine article in the mail that detailed the benefits of sales professionals taking a public speaking course. On second look, I saw that the article was actually an advertorial, complete with a registration form for the course at the end.

Attached to the piece was a post-it with a handwritten note which read: "Colleen, I thought you would find this interesting." It was signed with an illegible initial—Maybe a "J"? Maybe an "I"?—I couldn't be sure. I had no idea who had sent me this "highly informative article," but because of the handwritten note, I assumed I must know them. I looked at the envelope it had come in, and, sure enough, found no return address and an automated bulk mail stamp - sure signs of unsolicited mail.

I'd never heard of the company offering the seminar, nor anyone they were associated with. Clearly, they were trying to hide behind their anonymity because they knew, that I knew, that they did not know me.

Why Is This Crossing the Line?

By trying to pretend that they know and have a relationship with me even though they don't, this company is lying. To me, an approach that is based on a lie is the worst kind of mistake—and the absolute worst first impression—that any sales professional can make.

This lie is being used in the hope that I'll feel guilty enough about not remembering who they are that I will call the company to find out, at which point they can try to sell me on their seminar.

Will I be in the mood to be sold anything once I figure out their game? Will I ever buy anything from this company, or recommend them to my colleagues and associates? Am I likely to respond warmly to any follow-up call that might happen to come along?

The answer is no!

So if you've ever been tempted to try to lure new clients with a lie, first ask yourself this: if the prospect finds out what you're really up to, will they be mad or embarrassed? If the answer to either of these questions is yes, then find yourself a different tactic—fast.

How Not To Cross the Line

The idea of staying in touch with your customers and prospects by sending them an occasional article or other information is a good one. But if you use this technique, make sure the following rules of thumb are applied consistently, and without exception:

- The article is relevant to the prospect.
- The article is simply that—an article, not just a glorified advertisement for your product
- The prospect knows you and you clearly sign your name so they can see it is from you.
- You identify who you are on the envelope.
- You make a follow-up call after they've received it.

These steps just make good marketing sense.

Many business developers use terrible sales techniques to get past a gatekeeper and on to a decision maker. And those techniques usually end disastrously for the business developer involved. Below I've recounted and dissected two such cases in the hope that you will avoid doing the same.

#The Case of the Schoolyard Bully

While on vacation in March, I received a frantic call from my office. My assistant was panicked because she'd gotten a call from a man who insisted that he had a meeting set up with me for that day, and that it was "critical" that he talk to me. He also told her that he "had talked to me directly," that this was "a follow-up meeting," that I had "promised to talk to him," and even that he had "time sensitive information" he had to get to me.

When she finally got me on the phone, explained the situation, and told me what company he was calling from, I realized it was all a ruse. I had never talked to him or his company before. I did know enough about what they did, however, to realize that what they sold was not relevant to my business and I was not, nor ever would be, interested in the service they offered.

In other words, this man hadn't even spoken to me before, let alone scheduled a "follow-up" meeting. He also didn't offer anything that would be so "critical" to my business that I'd be glad to interrupt my vacation to talk to him.

Why Is This Crossing the Line?

This person lied. As far as I was concerned, that spelled the end of any business relationship he and I might ever have had.

To make matters worse, in order to get through to me (the "decision maker"), he tried to instigate panic in my assistant (the "gatekeeper") by confusing her into thinking she and I had made a mistake, and I would have to be disturbed.

He knew we'd never spoken, and that we did not have a meeting scheduled. He was simply hoping that I would feel so guilty about the possibility that I'd made a mistake that I would be willing to cancel whatever else I was doing to take his call. He was probably also hoping that same unwarranted guilt would make me feel I "owed him" enough to listen to his pitch.

Whenever you use a tactic that requires making someone else feel bad simply to get what you want, you're crossing the line not only between appropriate and inappropriate sales techniques, but also between being a smart or stupid salesperson—and, to my mind, between being a decent human being and a schoolyard bully.

Just ask yourself: If your prospect found out what you were doing, would they want to have a relationship with you?

How Not to Cross the Line

Assistants can be used effectively to secure appointments and to get decision makers on your side. However, you should never attempt to manipulate them or their relationship with your prospect. If you do get a gatekeeper on the phone, try the following, and see how much farther it will take you:

- Show them respect at all times.
- Treat them like the decision maker, and try your opening lines or lead-in questions with them. They may be able to point you towards other decision makers in the company who could be important to your sale.
- Ask them when the best time is to reach the decision maker.
- Ask if they can schedule fifteen minutes of time with the decision maker for you.

Always thank them for their help.

#The Case of the "Close, Personal Friend"

Finally, just a few days ago, a salesperson called our office claiming to be a "close, personal friend" of mine. My assistant asked if I knew her, and while I didn't think so, I decided to have my assistant put the caller through to me anyway.

A couple of minutes into her pitch, I interrupted her and said, "Excuse me. Do I know you?" She answered: "Not now, but if we do business together, I guarantee we will become good friends." Needless to say, we didn't do business together, and we aren't likely to at any point in the foreseeable future.

Why Is This Crossing the Line?

Say it with me now: This person lied. Even worse, it was a really stupid lie.

Did the salesperson really not think that, as soon as she had me on the phone, I'd realize she wasn't the "close, personal friend" she was claiming to be? Either she was hoping I would think her "idea" was clever, or that I was so stupid I couldn't remember who my friends are. Any sales tactic that makes the prospect feel as though they are an idiot simply can't end well.

Before you try any technique like this one, please ask yourself: If the prospect finds out what I'm doing, will they want to be my friend? Or, will I be happy with the consequences of earning a bad reputation, and a lost opportunity?

How Not to Cross the Line

Every time you call a decision maker, make sure you have a compelling reason to speak to them and make sure your opening line or leading question is tuned to their needs and offers them value. They will then want to take your calls without your having to lie to get them on the phone.

If you want to develop commonality with your prospects without resorting to trickery, try the following simple—and honest—approach:

- Use a real reference from someone you both know.
- Tell them a third party story about a client you've helped who is in their industry, and/or who is in their same position, such as a director or VP.
- Offer a piece of information that shows you know something about their business or industry that you can help them with. One of my clients who sells to the medical research industry, for example, leads with "your research into XYZ disease caught my attention...."

When it comes to being honest and being branded a liar, the line between what's appropriate and what isn't, isn't so much a "fine line" as it is a gaping chasm. Fall in, and you may never be able to find your way out.

Consider yourself warned.

Colleen Francis is Founder and President of Engage Selling Solutions. She understands the challenges of selling in today's market and how traditional sales techniques from decades ago often fall short. She's studied the habits of the top 10% of sales performers and complemented conventional wisdom of the sales process with proven techniques for a sales approach. You can email her at colleen@engageselling.com.