

Lost and Found

Reviving prospects who've disappeared into the black hole

HAVE YOU EVER had hot prospects who suddenly stopped returning your calls? If so, then you know how disconcerting it can be—especially when they'd expressed so much interest in your product or service only days before.

At first, you assume their lack of responsiveness is an isolated situation that will quickly self-correct. But after repeated

failed attempts to connect, you start to question your own sanity.

You could have sworn they were interested, but their current behavior indicates otherwise. And, not wanting to appear too desperate you're stymied in terms of what your next steps should be.

WHY THEY DISAPPEARED

As a seller, it's always important to analyze what may be causing this behavior before taking action. In my experience, these are the typical reasons why prospects disappear into "the black hole":

1) They're totally swamped. Without a doubt, this is the most common issue. In virtually every company today, people have way too much to do and not nearly enough time to get it all done. They fully intend to continue the conversation, but not right now.

2) Priorities changed. This can happen overnight. Changing market conditions, bad third-quarter results or new leadership are just a few of the possible root causes. But when this happens, it's almost impossible to regain your momentum in the short term.

3) Lack of urgency. Sometimes, sellers confuse a prospect's interest level with a desire to take action today. As such, they share all the glorious details about their offering instead of building a business case for immediate change.

4) Column fodder. Occasionally, prospects just need comparative bids/pricing to justify their decision to go with another company.

5) They know everything. When prospects feel they have all the information they need, there's literally no reason to talk with you any further.

Different reasons call for different actions. Some things are out of your control. But there are those you can prevent by doing things differently in your customer interactions. Always be open to this possibility since prevention is your best cure. In any case, you need answers! Is it "yea" or "nay"? Are they still interested or not? Should you keep pursuing them or find new prospects?

WHAT YOU CAN DO

When you don't know what's behind their silence, figuring out how to respond can be a dilemma—especially since you don't want to be a pest. Here are a few solutions to help you avoid doing just that.

• **Just keep trying.** Realize prospects expect you to carry the "keep in touch" burden. Often, it can take eight to 10 contacts before you actually reach them again. Don't panic. This is normal in today's business environment.

• **Make each connection valuable.** Don't say, "Hi Eric. Just getting back to you, as I promised, about your decision. If you have any questions, give me a call."

Instead, you might say, "Eric, based on our conversation last week, I know how important it is to you to shorten your sales cycle. There's a white paper on our Web site that addresses this issue. I'll be sending you a link via e-mail shortly."

• **Have a sense of humor.** After four to five contacts, leave something casual, such as, "Eric, I know you're swamped. But I also know that shortening your sales cycle is important to you. That's why I keep bugging you. I'm looking forward to finally reconnecting."

• **Leverage a variety of mediums.** Mix up phone calls with e-mails, mailings, invitations to upcoming events, etc. To position yourself as a resource,

make sure each connection educates, informs or adds insights.

• **Create multiple entry points.** Never let one person be your total gateway to a company. Identify and nurture multiple relationships concurrently. When appropriate, reference others you're talking to in your messages/e-mails.

• **Re-evaluate your initial connection.** How can you increase their urgency, determine if you're just column fodder or better tie your offering into their business priorities? In way too many cases, sellers have done a product/service dump when talking to prospects. Instead, you need to focus on critical business outcomes and the difference you can make.

• **Plan your next step now.** Never leave a meeting without a homework assignment (for you and/or the customer) and a firm follow-up appointment scheduled. If they're unwilling to do this, it's an indicator something may not be quite right—which should prompt you to explore their need and urgency in greater depth.

• **Let them off the hook.** Send an e-mail stating you thought they were interested, but perhaps you misjudged the situation since you haven't heard back from them in the last six weeks. Believe it or not, this strategy often gets a response and an explanation from a prospect who is feeling guilty about not reconnecting.

• **Reduce your contact frequency.** If, after 10 touches, you still haven't heard, start contacting them less often. A quarterly schedule might be more appropriate. Or, you might want to keep on top of what's happening in the account and reconnect at a more appropriate time.

By leveraging one or more of these strategies, you'll often be able to re-engage a prospect who has disappeared into "the black hole." Not always, but often. And, if you've continually provided value and focused on the impact your offering makes, they'll likely be ready to implement your solution.

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