

Web Warriors

The New Sales Force for Old Industries

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"I got tired of customers asking us to fly out and see them, then showing up to find out the meeting had been cut short or they were only wanting to suck us dry for information," explains Marinac, president of Cleveland-based American Built Containment Systems (ABC Systems). "Both the time and expense was killing us, particularly in an environment of shrinking margins."

Eliminating physical sales calls and the expense that goes with them is now possible even in the most stodgy of old line businesses like packaging. Business has jumped 40% for these "Packaging Experts" since Marinac completely changed their sales and business model from a "traditional pick up the phone and try (getting harder and harder) for a face-to-face appointment" into a web-based sales approach.

ABC Systems has become a web "warrior" and is radically changing the game in their industry. It's also an excellent model for those coming late to the internet game. From their ABC Direct WebPlatform and free online classes to their focus on optimizing their website for search engines like Google to their use of an outsourced web greeter service appropriately called Web Greeter, visit Marinac's website at www.abc-packaging.com and see what they're doing. And if you didn't understand a word I just said, its time you did or risk getting left behind.

Marinac reached this point in his sales approach when he noticed significant changes in the organizations of his customers. "In the old days companies had a Plant Manager, an Assistant Plant Manager, 5-10 Buyers, 3-4 Engineers, 2 Shipping-Receiving people, etc." notes Marinac. "However, those days are over...now it is a Plant Manager, a Buyer, and a Shipping/Receiving person, period. And often, the Plant Manager is the Buyer!" exclaims Marinac.

"These people don't have time to see salesman UNLESS their building is on fire, meaning they have a major problem. In the past we would have salespeople out there pounding on doors like every other packaging company...the best way to picture this is the old Gary Larson Comic 'The Midvale School for the Gifted' where the kid is pushing on the pull door. Today our clients are beginning to use the Internet and search engines to look for specialty packaging instead of waiting for a salesperson to show up."

As such, ABC Systems is reinventing their sales approach. Instead of getting a lead about a project in Buffalo and driving to Buffalo, Marinac and his much smaller sales team take the contact into a WebMeeting (ABC has formalized the name) to discuss, design, and gauge their interest. This would be impossible to do just over the phone since there's such an important visual component to the sale. They need to be able to show the client what various packaging options look like before they can commit to sending samples. If they want to move further, the potential customer pays to have samples made and then Marinac might send someone to Buffalo to see them.

“What is even more amazing is the fact that many times I don't even go to Buffalo or Omaha or Minnesota. I'll ship the samples, go into another WebMeeting to discuss any changes, AND close the deal...without ever going to see the customer face-to-face. This is unheard of!” exclaims Marinac. “No one in the packaging industry is doing this.”

Marinac's web approach is also proactively driving business to the company. First they revamped their website and optimized it around certain key words so they appear on the first page or two of various search engines when customers come looking for packaging products. Many companies are doing most of their sourcing exclusively online and you had better be in the flight path of buyers' searches.

Then they added a live operator to welcome customers when they come to the website. Not having someone greeting customers on your website is like having a retail store without any sales staff. They further guarantee that if a customer asks to be contacted that day, they guarantee it will happen that day. Marinac knows that when a prospect is hot you need to strike quickly.

Case in point, ABC Systems had a company contact them regarding a Point of Purchase Display via one of the search engines. The web greeter grabbed them and put them in contact with Tammi, an ABC sales associate, who contacted them back within the hour. Once on the phone, she qualified the project (are they price shopping or was this a legitimate project) and determined that only a *part* of the project was for a Point of Purchase Display...what they really needed was a thermoformed clamshell for retail stores.

Within 2 hours Marinac held a WebMeeting between himself and their thermoformer supplier, worked through a few designs, showed them to the customer, and overnighted a sample by noon the next day. “We had a design done and an electronic ‘rendering’ of what the light would look like in the clamshell and to the client in less than 24 hours from when the customer first visited our website!” gleams Marinac. More importantly, they secured the initial order of 90,000 clamshells and the Point of Purchase Displays and are looking at another 500,000 piece order after that.

“Our business is up 40%...and we've barely scratched the surface,” summarizes Marinac. And like all smart entrepreneurs, Marinac is finding ways to get others to pay for all this technology by marketing their ABC Direct WebPlatform to their own suppliers, who are also drastically reducing or eliminating their outside sales forces.

Next month I'll share additional ways small to mid-size firms are using the web to deal with the global competition that is facing all companies. In the meantime, get your website optimized (or at least learn what that means!).