

## Prospecting for New Business

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EAST GREENWICH, RI—One way to expand your call center is to let the business come to you. Indeed, this may be a viable strategy for some call centers where word of mouth in the organization is so strong that the phone keeps ringing from other departments wanting services.

Another way to expand your call center is to proactively look for opportunities both within and outside the organization. If this is your direction, Carolyn Merriman, President of the East Greenwich, Rhode Island-based Corporate Health Group says there is a most logical way you can move forward with this. First, "make sure that you have something you can sell," she says. "Is your product functional and are your results stellar. Make sure you can articulate this."

A critical part of this articulation is to make sure that you can describe the call center and how it can solve business problems. After you've got that orientation correct, then you can move to the next step.

"Look at your organization's strategic plan; look at the product lines, key departments and where the hospital is investing money," Merriman says. "Make a list of who in this group you can make an impact on."

The next step is to "do the research before you have a meeting with the department so you know the questions to ask the prospect," she adds.

Getting the meeting with the targeted department can be done via phone or email and may take the assistance of your boss. The communication should be short and direct. "For example, you might say that you've been doing some research on the department's strategic plan for '07 and you've noticed they are looking to improve patient satisfaction." You have some ideas for how the department can achieve that goal and would be happy to communicate them in a 30 minute or one hour meeting. In the meeting itself, you can help confirm what you've learned from the strategic plan. "This lets the customer know that you've done your research," she says. If that is the case, you can explore what is going on with the business and how the call center might help.

There are two paths the conversation might go depending on your past outreach efforts. If, for example, you are pitching your expertise at discharge calls and you're already doing it for one or more departments, the prospect can be encouraged to contact them as a reference. But if you are courting a completely new outreach opportunity "you could say that you'd like to do a pilot or demonstration program" and go from there.

The next step is to offer to put it in writing and in the next meeting offer a detailed cost projection and process map that shows how it would all be handled. "You can offer a call center tour to them and ask them to sit in and observe phone calls if they'd like," she says.

## **It Takes Two to Tango**

So, what happens when your prospect is not necessarily enthused by what you have to say? It depends, Merriman says, on whether you have a clear vision that this opportunity is a strong strategic fit with the department and organization. If it's real clear to you that this is a great fit then you can ask the individual why he or she doesn't think it will work. Perhaps they are afraid to change or perhaps it's political. Offering a sample or test on a small basis might be successful as a way to get in the door. If the answer is still no after a fairly consistent selling effort, then perhaps it might be best trying to pitch the idea to another department. Then later, the original department targeted might come aboard as they see your successes with others, she maintains.

For other scenarios where you are less certain of the fit, it may be somewhat unsettling to hear the various roadblocks to doing it presented by your target. It may make sense to end the selling process and rethink the potential opportunity.

## **Sales is Sales**

Merriman wouldn't change anything about the approach when extending it out to external audiences. For example, in selling after-hours telephone triage services, she would still do the research on the practice ahead of time and understand what the hot buttons might be going into a preliminary meeting with the practice. A part of that research might be attending physician practice office manager meetings to get a pulse on what's going on.

Merriman believes that external call center sales efforts can go way beyond the more traditional after-hours telephone triage service. There are clinical and non-clinical opportunities available. "There are a lot of government contracts—state, city, municipalities—that call centers can get," she says. "There are other non-profit organizations. There could be collaboration for call center services for United Way organizations for example.

"Thinking out of the box is helpful. For example, perhaps you could be the after hours customer service center for a retail operation or other kinds of corporations."

One way to help find opportunities is to look to the business community through the local chamber of commerce and possibly through business and community leaders who sit on the healthcare organization's board, she says. After all, the call center has the people and the technology already in place, so why not.

