



Conquering Telephobia Improving Selling Behaviors

By Jeffrie Story
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“It doesn’t matter if I have Telephobia. I’m an outside sales rep!”

I’ve heard these disastrous words many times. Outside salespeople frequently don’t like to use the telephone. Their reflexive behavior is to jump in their vehicles and hit the streets, which is an excellent behavior if they’re making good use of that time. Frequently, however, they are not.

Telephobia is a measurable type of Sales Call Reluctance®, as discovered by Behavioral Sciences Research Press, for whom I am a licensee. It describes the subtle fears and hesitations that people can have when initiating prospecting by phone with people they don’t know. Although this column focuses on outside reps, Telephobia also affects inside reps if you have them make outbound calls.

Managers compound Telephobia if they rigidly insist that everyone leave the office by nine o’clock and not return until four. Many newspaper organizations use this approach, with good intentions. The end result, however, can be a loss in new sales productivity.

Here are some negative sales-limiting behaviors and habits in reps caused by Telephobia:

- Stopping in repeatedly on prospective new accounts to see if they can meet the decision-maker
- Picking up business cards all day long, which they call prospecting, but doing nothing with those cards other than creating a big stack in the office
- Not using the phone to reach new prospects to set appointments
- Doing too much servicing work in person, rather than by phone when possible

There are ways outside salespeople can use the phone to save time and increase sales, including:

- Identifying the decision-maker
- Setting valid appointments with decision-makers to save drive time and maximize productivity
- Qualifying and making appointments with prospects from target lists: previous advertisers, segmented prospects, etc.

- Handling service issues

Managers need to be the driving force behind change, whether reps have Telephobia or merely negative ingrained habits. Here are three things you can do to gain the revenue that Telephobia is costing you:

1. Make sure your reps know how to make prospecting calls. If they don't feel confident in their skill level, they probably won't tell you. They'll just avoid calling.
2. Set what expectations you have in calling. Assigning a pre-set number of calls before reps leave the office is a good way to start. Be sure to follow up.
3. Require reps to utilize mobile phones during the day to continue prospecting and setting appointments, or confirming appointments before driving 30 minutes out of their way.

Another tip: calling prospects should be done early in the day. Your reps' energy is highest then, plus leaving it for later in the day guarantees that it won't get done. It also demonstrates your priority in making sure the calling is done.

While it depends on the market, the prospect or client, and the issue at hand, I can guarantee that you have sales potential hidden in the telephone!

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