

800 Numbers

By Bob Osgoodby

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Much has been written about the value of 800 numbers. Basically, an 800 number is like calling someone collect, since they pay for the call instead of you. Does an 800 number increase the chances of making a sale? Let's explore this a bit.

Suppose you read an advertisement, or visit a web site that lists an 800 number where you can get more information. Many times you get a "canned" spiel which, if you bother to listen to the whole thing, asks for your number so they can return your call. At that point, many people simply hang up as they don't want to give out their private number. The last thing they want is to be put on another telemarketing list. This tactic is used extensively in network marketing. Does it work? The jury is still out on this one.

Some make you fight your way through a maze of options - press 1 for this, 2 for that, and so on. Some don't even give the option of talking with a live person. If you don't select one it simply starts the option selection process again. - The jury is in on this one. The owner of this 800 number will pay for a lot of calls, that simply frustrate the caller and will never result in a sale. What a waste!

If you're lucky, you get a real person who answers the phone, and who can help. Now let's switch the focus here a bit, and make believe you are the person who answers. Is the caller a serious prospect, a bored teenager with nothing better to do, or what they refer to in the automotive trade as a "tire kicker"?

Trying to determine if they are a serious prospect is a challenge. If they are, you might make the sale. If they aren't however, how do you gracefully end the conversation? Many small businesses are a "one horse" shop, without the staff, and equipment necessary to handle multiple calls. Every minute you are on the phone, with someone who is not a serious prospect, is not only wasting your time, but may cost you another customer, who can't get through because the line is busy.

Some people, who may have a slight interest, think that because it is a toll free number they don't have anything to lose, so they make the call. It doesn't cost them anything, so why not. These are your "tire kickers", are usually not serious prospects, and are wasting your resources.

How do you avoid these types of problems? Simple, don't have an 800 number. If a person has to spend their "nickel" for the call, they have already pre-qualified themselves as a serious prospect. You know that time spent with them will be productive. Now the small entrepreneur must have a separate phone line for this. If you are involved in several businesses, you should have a line for each one. That way, when the phone rings, depending on the number called, you can answer the

phone in a businesslike manner.

We used 800 numbers with our businesses. As an experiment, we took the 800 number off our website, and put in a non-toll free number. Two things happened and they were both good. First, the number of calls received decreased by almost 80 percent. This of course concerned us at first. Secondly however, we saw our sales dramatically increase. Why? Because the prospects were pre-qualifying themselves, and we were not wasting our time, or losing calls due to lines being busy.

Do 800 numbers have a place in your business plan? Sure! If you are product oriented, a toll free order line is essential. People may hesitate to pay a toll for a product they wish to order. If you are service oriented, it is a must for technical support. With long waiting times for help, it would be a real turn off if one wasn't available.

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