



# Contacting Prospective Customers

by Dr. Ivan Misner, Ph.D.

*Make the most  
of your first  
communication with  
future customers*

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Your referral source has done her job. Now it's time to contact the prospect. But be careful: The purpose of your first contact is not to make a sale or even ask the prospect if he has questions about your business. If—and only if—the prospect asks, should you present your products or services during this initial contact.

The purpose of the first contact with the prospect is:

- to begin to build the relationship;
- to get to know the prospect better;
- to help the prospect get to know you better;
- to position yourself to make your next contact; and
- to see if the prospect fits your source's description of her.

Before making contact, do your homework. If you don't have them, ask for copies of all correspondence your source sent the prospect on your behalf. Find out from your source the best way to make your initial contact—by telephone? Letter? E-mail? In person?

## **Meet the Face**

When your source gives you the green light, don't let the opportunity grow stale. Make your first contact with the prospect within 72 hours of getting the go-ahead. If your source can be present, the most advantageous contact is a face-to-face meeting at which your source can introduce you. This introduction should be more than just "Harry, this is Jerry. Jerry, this is Harry." Your source should give the prospect a more thorough briefing about you, your business and your products or services. For example:

"Harry Prospect, this is Vic Vendor, whom I was telling you about last week at our club meeting. Vic and I have known each other for more than five years. For the past two years, I've let him handle all my travel arrangements, and I can't count up all the dollars he's saved me, not to



mention bench time in airport lounges. Vic's really active in the community; we're going to give him our service award at our next chamber meeting. He's also a good golfer, and he skis a lot in the winter, although I find it hard to believe because he's never broken a leg.

"Vic, Harry's been a very special customer of mine for at least fifteen years. His daughter and mine went to school together, and he let me cater her wedding three years ago...."

During this first contact, your prospect may likely have questions for you, but he typically won't ask them during this initial meeting unless he has an urgent need for the kind of products or services you provide.

### **Drop a Line**

If your first meeting with your prospect can't be in person, your best bet is to write—a letter, a card, or email, for example—rather than to phone, as you did your prospective source. Writing gives you a better, more controlled opportunity to convey what you've learned about the prospect. It helps develop your relationship to let your prospect know you find him interesting enough to have taken the time to learn a few facts about him—not the fact that he needs your products or services, but the fact that he's a member of the Downtown Executive Society or that "Tom told me you're a great chess player." Express an interest in meeting him, and advise him you'll be calling to schedule a mutually convenient appointment.

When you start composing your note to him, keep in mind that he may not have read, or remembered, the materials your source sent him. So start by naming your referral source—a name he'll recognize:

*Dear Glen:*

*Joan Irvine, whom I understand was one of your students, recommended I get in touch with you. Joan tells me you're an avid butterfly collector....*

Don't send business literature or your business card with your first correspondence. Your stationary should have all the contact information your prospect needs to reach you. Avoid giving the impression that you're interested in him primarily as a prospective customer.

Give the prospect some time to receive your correspondence before you follow up with a phone call. When you do, and if your prospect agrees, try to schedule a face-to-face meeting. Even if your prospect isn't



receptive to that, offer to send more information, and if the prospect indicates he'd like this, send it right away—and don't forget to send a copy of your correspondence to your referral source.

### **Ring Up**

If your source recommends it and can guide you as to the best time to do so, you can make your initial contact with your prospect by phone:

*“Hello, Ms. Clearchannel. I'm Dr. Mark Star, and I'm calling you at the recommendation of Trudy Grossman.”*

*“Oh, hi, Mark. Trudy told me about you. She's quite impressed with your book, which she sent me a copy of. I'd like to have you on my show. Can you come to my studio two weeks from today?”*

The above situation isn't just a fantasy—your prospect could decide immediately to do business with you. If you and your referral source have prepared the ground well, and if you're lucky, your efforts may pay off on your very first call. Most often, though, the prospect—even a referral lead—will need more time or express an interest in talking later about your products or services. (And even if they put you off, you're almost certainly better off than if you'd made your first contact by cold call, mass advertising or direct-mail campaign.)

### **Follow Up**

When building relationships, it's always important not to let much time lapse without following up the first contact. Within two to three days, you should send your prospect a note expressing your pleasure in communicating with him. It's still too early, though, to send business literature or make any move toward sales promotion.

So follow up early, but don't push beyond the prospect's comfort level. Once the prospect has expressed an interest in your products or services, you can provide information about them, but don't force it on him. Continue presenting your products or services, but avoid the hard sell. Focus on fulfilling his needs and interests. Your goal should be to keep your prospect aware of your business without annoying him.

Remember, to secure long-term loyalty of your prospect and convert her into a customer, you must first build a relationship. It may take a while, but if you've selected and briefed your sources well, and if you follow my recommendations, you'll speed up the process.



## Questions:

**The kind of referral and the method of first contact are somewhat dependant on the type of business you're in, aren't they?**

Why would it be? There may be some variations, but why would there be a big difference in the way you make first contact?

**I guess I'm thinking if I am looking for a florist to mail an arrangement to a friend, I probably don't need a face-to-face introduction from my referral source to the referral source they're recommending to me.**

OK, fair enough. A lot of the material I talk about references a time-confidence curve—certain professions take longer before people have confidence in their ability to refer them effectively. Certainly a profession at the low end of the time-confidence curve, like a florist, is going to be a lot different because that first contact is going to be a sale or it's not going to be a sale. There's not a lot of information and not a lot of diligence that needs to be done. But as you move up that time-confidence curve, I think the process is very similar from one profession to another. I think it's more about people than it is the profession. I think it's more about the way you present this than it is about the type of profession that you're in.

**It may have something to do with the amount of dollars you are talking about, right? A single floral arrangement to be delivered is maybe \$100. But if you're talking about an annual floral contract to provide arrangements for the entry way of your business, you're talking about a lot more dollars, and maybe you do need to meet face to face with that individual.**

That's correct. And that has a lot to do with the time-confidence curve. As you move up the curve, there tends to be more expensive products or services. I would say much of what I was talking about was aimed at that and not the low end where the sale is under \$100 and where you don't really need to meet the person.

But let's take the florist as an example. What if it were a wedding? Now you're definitely going to want to meet the florist because you're spending a lot more money. And it's for a very important event. And I believe almost every bride meets the florist and has a long conversation with them before they hire them as a florist for any sizable wedding. So even there, in that example, I think all of the strategies that I've laid out here are relevant because now you're talking about something a little higher on the time-



confidence curve. Even though it's a florist, it's a very large project so it's going to cost more.

**You've talked about how to set up the first contact, and said not to begin by selling – or even presenting – your products or services. So what do you talk about in those first meetings?**

Well first of all, you know that they're interested because your referral source connected the two of you. They know that they're there to talk about that. I think the most important thing is to ask questions - find ways to help them. I really believe in relationship networking and relationship selling. If you can find ways to help the prospect, that's a great way to build the relationship and to sell your products and services. I have no problem selling. I just believe that the process needs to be a comfortable one and it's really comfortable when you as a salesperson or business owner are talking about ways that you can help them effectively. And clearly you're leading them down the path toward buying your products or services, but you do it in a subtle way that doesn't feel pushy and is part of the process of consulting with them and helping them to achieve the things that they're looking for. It's very effective and it works. Not all people do it that way.

Many salespeople come in and they're like a bull in a china shop. They're trying to close the deal the first time. Those are the kinds of salespeople that, frankly, none of us really like. I try to teach people who are building their business through referrals to build it based on relationships, and that means you need to know more about the person.

**I've heard the average new prospect doesn't actually buy until after you have had *seven* contacts with them, but that the average salesperson gives up after *three* contacts if they haven't had any success. Does that ring true to you?**

It absolutely rings true with me. I think that's one of the reasons why there is such high turnover in sales professions. I mean, look at the turnover that you see in a lot of sales industries. It's because they give up very soon. The thing with the referral process though is that you don't have to contact someone seven times to get the business. If you're referred to somebody, you're quite likely able to get it in that first, second or third contact. That first contact may be a relationship builder. That second contact may be working out the details of the products or services they need. And often times by that third meeting, you're closing the sale. Now not every referral turns into a sale. But a substantially



higher number of referrals than cold calls turn into sales. And so, if you're focusing on developing your business through referrals, it doesn't take seven contacts. If you're focusing on building your business through cold calls, it probably takes at least seven contacts, and that's why there's such a high turnover in the sales industry.

**You've said in the past there is no one "best" form of follow-up, except whichever type you'll do consistently. Can you explain that?**

I think that in a perfect world the best way to follow up today is a hand written note. I mean, nobody does hand written notes. It's almost unheard of. Everything is e-mail and some phone calls. It's one of the reasons why I like to use the SendOutCards program, because you can get on your computer and do what appears to be a handwritten note and send it out. I'm supposed to be one of the world's leading experts in networking, and I hate doing handwritten notes. I'm just not very good at it. And so programs like SendOutCards are effective, but the truth is anything you do consistently is the most important thing. It's the best thing to do. If you're not good at doing hand written cards, telling somebody that they need to write hand written cards means that they're just going to feel guilty that they're not doing it. So the best follow up is the one that you do consistently.

Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. I taught a management theory course at a state university in California for over a decade. And every year I'd have students say to me, "Dr. Misner, we just went through all kinds of management theories. What's the best one to use in managing people?" And I always told them it's the one that fits your personality that you do consistently. Why do you think there are so many different management theories? Because there are different styles. There are different approaches to working with people and the one that resonates most with you, and the one that you're going to use consistently, is the one that you're going to have the most success with.

Well, it's the same with follow up. The one method that you do consistently is the one that you're going to have the most success with. Consistency is the key in the follow up process.



*Called the father of modern networking by CNN, Dr. Ivan Misner is a New York Times bestselling author. He is the Founder and Chairman of BNI ([www.bni.com](http://www.bni.com)), the world's largest business networking organization. His latest book, *Truth or Delusion* can be viewed at [www.TruthorDelusion.com](http://www.TruthorDelusion.com). Dr. Misner is also the Sr. Partner for the Referral Institute, an international referral training company ([www.referralinstitute.com](http://www.referralinstitute.com)).*