

Taking orders not on the sales menu this year

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Ever since we launched "Follow the Lead" late last summer, we have been discussing – agonizing might be a better word – the wisdom of cold calling in a digital world.

Despite the proliferation of online sales tools (not to mention the explosion in social media), don't tell sales consultant Andrea Sittig-Rolf, CEO of Sittig Inc., that cold calling is dead. But "taking orders," at least when it comes to sales, is on life support.



"There's a difference between 'order takers' and sales professionals," said Sittig-Rolf, whose clients include CDW, Hewlett-Packard and Office Depot. "The sales professional knows how to ask the right questions that allow prospects to realize on their own what [products and services] they need. Anybody can take an order. What takes skill is asking questions that can add to the understanding of what clients need, what their pain points are or what it is they're trying to accomplish."

She said other facets of traditional calling – such as when sales reps monopolize the conversation, yakking about bells and whistles – are also going by the wayside. "When the reps say too much, prospects get overwhelmed because they're getting information they may or may not care about."

As the Web upends traditional sales techniques – and b-to-b buyers grow more sophisticated via the Web in their ability to determine the value of product and services – sales execs need to find ways to integrate social media and online tools into their day-to-day sales arsenal, Sittig-Rolf added. "Among sales execs, digital is easy to ignore."

Gordon Bye, president of Sales Growth Specialists, added that many b-to-b companies (in the \$10 million-\$100 million range) are still skittish about using online tools (search engine optimization [SEO], search engine marketing [SEM] and social-networking sites such as LinkedIn and Twitter).

"They know about the [social networking] tools, but don't necessarily know where to start," Bye said. The CEO of a b-to-b company with, say, 200 employees, doesn't have the luxury to track Twitter or update his Facebook several times a day, Bye added. And while sales reps and other employees are engaging with social networks, "the decision-maker two levels up is not doing it," Bye said.

It may take some convincing, but obtaining buy-in from the tippy top shouldn't be as difficult as proponents think. "In the next 12 months to 24 months everyone is going to get this stuff figured out," Bye said. "[Sales reps] need to demonstrate to managers that starting off, it may be a small shift in budget, taking money out of direct marketing and putting some of it into social networking. A lot of managers say, 'That's all it takes?'"

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