Small Business: Keeping the sales pipeline full

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In this kind of economy, your sales pipeline can never be too full.

It constantly needs to be replenished, given longer sales cycles and the continued reluctance of people to spend.

Even if you think you have enough prospects in the pipeline, chances are you don't, say experts.

"Your pipeline always needs to be bursting," says Andrea Sittig-Rolf, author of "The Seven Keys to Effective Business-to-Business Appointment Setting: Unlock Your Sales Potential" (Aspatore Books; $24.95) and president of Sittig Inc., a new business development firm in Redmond, Wash. "You want to have more prospects in your pipeline than you could possibly work with if they all decided to do business with you."

That requires doing even more prospecting, cold calling and door knocking, and not just with new prospects, but with your existing customers as well.

When calling new prospects, the initial call should focus on setting an appointment, not making a sale, advises Sittig-Rolf. This allows you to make a larger volume of calls.

Tell prospects you'd like to make an appointment and learn a bit more about their organization to determine whether working together would be a good fit, she says. If they object, name a company that initially objected to meeting with you but ended up benefiting from a solution you provided (i.e., ABC company was able to save $15,000).

If you get voice mail, leave a message. An effective one is, "I'm calling about XYZ Co. (Fill in the blank with the name of one of your current customers) . . . would you please return my call?" says Sittig-Rolf. It will spark curiosity and when the person returns your call, tell him or her about a solution or savings you offered a similar company.

3 WAYS ANDREA SUGGESTS TO INCREASE SALES

1. Commit daily to getting on the phone and making two appointments or an hour's worth of calls, which ever comes first. It will make cold calling less dreaded.

2. Create referral "ambassadors" -- people who will speak so highly of you they practically sell for you.

3. Do more of everything -- networking, prospecting, etc.