

This year the fourth quarter seems especially challenging. We have a handle on accounts receivable, our margins are decent to good. And we have some money in the bank. It seems like focusing on sales is what I need to do. What's your advice?

This owner has the right attitude. Use sales to move the business forward, or keep it out of a slump. Focus on offense rather than defense.

Here are some things you can do to build up sales. Define the team who will work on sales. Review customer lists for opportunity. Define strategies for getting new leads. Look for opportunities to join forces. Make it everyone's job to build sales, which in turn will do the most to help save everyone's job. Let's get to work!

Start with asking staff to pitch in. Some people may be able to research prospects. Others may be able to build a database. If you're lucky, you have one or more people who are good at making appointments; they can call prospects and set up meetings for sales people. Get a group of people together to go to a trade show to hand out literature and gather business cards – it's always more fun in a group.

Perhaps one or more people in your company are especially good at talking to customers. Put them to work calling past customers and asking for additional business. Find out what old customers need, then get to work providing it.

Ask why they bought from you last time. How satisfied were they with the products, services and support they received from your company? Will they consider your company again? What is it that they might need in the future, that your company could supply?

Weed out junk. Make space for new prospects. New great customers are more likely to walk in the door, and be recognized when they approach your company, if there's room for them. Be open to the possibility of something even better coming along, if only you'll eliminate some of your problem accounts.

There are lots of ways to open the door to new leads. Telemarketing, cold calling, referrals, testimonials, advertising, direct mail and email blasts – these are just a few of the door openers your team can use. Don't slow down on these efforts just because finances are tight – in fact, speed things up to get cash flow moving.

Telemarketing is a great tool to open doors in a recession. Many buyers get conservative, don't know where to focus, and are less likely to open their wallets without prompting. Effective telemarketing can reach across the barriers of confusion, concern and hesitation. Pull prospects out of their funk and get them to focus on how your company can make their world better.

Gather testimonials on how you've helped your clients. Maybe you saved them money, increased their profit, helped them expand, or get better at what they do. Proof sources are especially valuable. Buyers fear making a mistake. Testimonials help to reassure them that they're taking the right step in hiring your company. Show them examples of clients who look just like they do, and who have benefited from working with your company.

Consider combining forces with your business peers. Find other companies that call on your target market, but that don't compete directly with your company. Offer to share marketing costs. Opening the door to a new prospect is often the most expensive and time consuming part of the sale. If two of you are sharing efforts, you may get twice as far, or cover the same ground for half the cost.

If you can find companies with complimentary services, propose more than lead sharing. Offer to expose your customer list to their services, if they'll do the same for you. One of you already has a trusted relationship. That makes it easier to open the door for the other company to get in the door.

Involve everyone – help them see the importance of their role in the success of your company's sales. From the time the phone gets answered, until the client says, "thank you:", and "job well done", it's up to everyone in your company to make

prospects feel welcome. The tone of voice on the phone – is it welcoming and helpful. The inquiries from prospects – are they met with eagerness and a desire to help.

You can explain to your employees it this way. A growing company creates opportunity, and insures jobs are there for people. Helping to get the next customer and keep the last one, leads to job security, especially in tough economic times. And that means it's everyone's responsibility to pitch in, to help get sales, willingly.

Looking for a good book? Try *The Ultimate Small Business Marketing Toolkit: All the Tips, Forms and Strategies You'll Ever Need*, by Beth Goldstein.

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