Writing Effective Prospecting Emails: An Instructional Guide

By Jennifer L. Dapko and Andrew B. Artis

The massive and cumbersome amount of advice on how to plan and write effective prospecting emails from communications experts is condensed into an easy to use guide for salespeople. This guide offers specific instruction around five key requirements for writing effective prospecting emails: 1) grab and hold the prospect's attention, 2) instill trust, 3) communicate a call-to-action, 4) avoid perceptions of spam, and 5) fine tune your writing. Sales managers and instructors will find this "how to" guide especially useful in preparing novice salespeople and reviewing with veterans what are the best practices for using email to court new clients.

Effective prospecting is necessary for salespeople charged with discovering, qualifying and winning over potential customers, and this makes writing effective prospecting emails a critical skill. For example, Forrester Research reports that executives prefer salespeople contact them via email rather than by telephone (Santucci 2010). Emails allow executives to quickly scan topics for issues and route the email to the correct person (Santucci 2010). Many salespeople seem to understand the preference for emails: business professionals receive an average of 13 unsolicited emails per day (Radicati 2011). Unfortunately, unsolicited business-to-business prospecting emails are only opened by the intended recipient an average 9 to15 percent of the time and only 3 percent of the recipients, at best, are likely to learn more by clicking on a link provided by the sender (Gospe 2013). This means that as much as 91 percent of prospecting emails never even get opened. Hence, salespeople need to find ways to be more effective users of email as a tool for prospecting. Given the large amount of advice published on the "dos and don'ts" of crafting business emails (e.g., a single *Google* search yields more than 8,000 hits) it is often overwhelming for salespeople to master this important topic on their own. Therefore, we provide a condensed guide for salespeople by consolidating the best practices for writing persuasive emails reported by experienced sales veterans, marketing consults, and communications experts. Sales managers and instructors will find this guide especially useful in preparing novice salespeople who are about to enter the field, and reviewing with veterans how to craft more effective emails.

THINK BEFORE YOU WRITE

All business communications benefit when authors use strategic thinking (Chan 2005); therefore, it is essential to position the art of crafting prospecting emails within the larger strategic process of selling. Preplanning is very important when targeting an email at a prospect, and it requires that the salesperson understand three things: 1) the specific prospecting plan for the client, 2) the selling firm's value proposition for the client, and 3) the exact goal of the email (Hershkowitz-Coore 2012).

Review the Prospecting Plan for the Client

A well-designed prospecting plan for a potential client clarifies how the salesperson (and/or team) will implement the firm's sales strategy: identify the decision makers and their roles within the prospect's firm; set specific, measurable and attainable sales goals; identify how to use a mix of prospecting methods; document and evaluate client response; etc. (Johnston and Marshall 2008). When crafting the prospecting plan consider carefully how the different communication channels will be used in combination (e.g., email, website, social media, telephone, direct mail, etc.) to fulfill the information needs of the prospect, rather than focusing on how any single communication tool will be used by the seller (Shipley and Schwalbe 2008). Hence,

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prospecting emails have to be married with the larger selling effort used to target a potential client.

Review the Value Proposition for the Client

Demonstrating value is a key component of selling whether communicating with customers face-to-face, over the phone, or in writing. This requires reviewing the prospect's "pain" points and then clearly communicating the product's corresponding benefits through a value statement (Ciotti 2013; Connick n.d.; Duistermaat 2013; Mann n.d.). Salespeople should not assume prospects will independently recognize why they should act on email sent to them (Ellis n.d.). Before writing prospecting emails salespeople should have a good understanding of their own firms' value proposition and the premier benefit their products provide to prospects. Premier benefits typically help prospects to: increase profits, drive revenue, or bolster sales; save time or money; and, feel good, look good, sound smart, have fun, experience less stress, be safe, feel secure and/or confident (Hershkowitz-Coore 2012). Hence, take the time to evaluate the prospect's unique needs and the selling firm's value proposition for better segmenting and targeting.

Review the Purpose for the Email

Once the salesperson is confident that an email is an appropriate tool for a given situation, specify the goal of the email and measure its success against this standard (Chan 2005). For example, if your goal is to simply get the prospect to visit your homepage then a "win" occurs if the prospect clicks on your URL link. Given the email-recipient's role within the firm (e.g., decider, initiator, user, influencer, gatekeeper, buyer, or controller) it is important to clarify if s/he has the authority and ability to act upon your request before drafting the email (Bonoma 1982). The email-recipient cannot answer the call-to-action if it is not within her/his power.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our primary research objectives are to condense and categorize the large amount of over lapping advice on prospecting emails into a manageable number of themes that organize and explain the best practices used in the field. To accomplish this, two research methods were used in combination: a literature review was used to provide a subjective narrative overview summarizing previous work (Weed 2005), and then a qualitative content analysis was used to substantiate the reliability of the themes that arose (Kolbe and Burnett 1991).

Literature Review

A literature review of the works of nearly 50 authors and more than 1,000 pages from articles, books, book chapters, reports, blogs, and interviews were used to develop this guide. Following widely-used practices for qualitative research the first step was designed to gain reasonable coverage of the concept rather than maximizing sample size; thus, we continued to collect additional data until the advice was largely redundant or off topic (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Patton 1990). A well-constructed literature review helps the target audience make sense of a large amount of information. Hence, we review the extant information on how to write a prospecting email and consolidate it into digestible chunks for salespeople, sales managers, and sales trainers. In all, we catalogued, consolidated, and summarized 260 tips suggested by on-the-ground sources whose livelihoods depend on writing persuasive emails—from frontline reps to boardroom executives. The diversity of perspectives allowed us to include tips, ideas, and advice from a wide cross section of professionals who work as sales consultants, marketing strategists, corporate sales trainers, and more. Table 1 demonstrates the breadth of expertise of authors represented in the literature review.

Sample

What was revealed during the process of collecting the data was rather surprising: academic research related to email communication is sparse (an exception is Dapko and Artis 2014). Instead, practitioners have been pushing the boundaries of what effective email should and shouldn't include using intuition, past experience, and trial-and-error as their guide. This justifies the use of practitioner sources as the starting point for this research, and it identifies an opportunity for academic researchers to investigate why certain prospecting emails may be more effective. The catalogue of tips, ideas and advice were from the following sources:

TABLE 1: Description of Literature Reviewed

Author	Author Expertise	Publication Type	% of Tips in Master Database
Bellows 2012	Founder & CEO of Email Marketing Consulting Firm	Web Article	0.4%
Carlozo 2014	Columnist and Contributing Writer	Web Article	0.4%
Ciotti 2013	Development Psychology Expert	Web Article	6.6%
Colombo 2000	E-Business Expert and President of Influence Technologies	Trade Publication	1.5%
Connick n.d.	Sales Expert and Content Strategist for Nat'l Assoc. of Sales Professionals	Web Article	3.1%
Cuciniello 2013	Corporate Communications Trainer	Trade Publication	4.6%
Dalton 2004	Marketing Expert	Trade Publication	1.2%
Dapko and Artis 2014	Academics, Ph.D.s in Marketing	Trade Publication	0.8%
Duistermaat 2013	Marketer, Copywriter, and Corporate Trainer	Web Article	7.7%
Duistermaat n.d.	Marketer, Copywriter, and Corporate Trainer	Web Article	1.9%
Ellis n.d.	Journalist	Web Article	1.9%
Email Excellence 2012	Author Unknown	Web Article	1.9%
Fralic 2013	Business Development Expert	Web Article	1.2%
Friedman 2012	President of a Customer Service Training Company	Web Article	3.5%
FTC 2014	Author Unknown	Web Article	0.4%
Gardner 2013	Sales Consultant and American Marketing Assoc. Marketer of the Year Award	Web Article	0.4%
Hershkowitz-Coore 2012	Corporate Sales Trainer and Professional Speaker	Book	17.8%
Huppke 2014	Business Journalist	Web Article	0.4%
James 2014	Book Author, Professional Speaker, and Award-Winning Blogger	Web Article	1.9%
Kawasaki 2012	Book Author, Marketing Executive, and Professional Speaker	Trade Publication	3.9%
Krogue 2010	Book Author, Professional Speaker and Co-Founder of Inside Sales	Web Article	0.4%
Mailchimp n.d.a.	Author Unknown	Web Article	0.4%
Mailchimp n.d.b.	Author Unknown	Web Article	0.4%
Maly 2012	President and Co-Founder of Natural Persuasion Technologies	Web Article	1.9%
Mann n.d.	Business Writer	Web Article	1.9%
Marsh 2013	Human Behavior User Experience Design Expert	Web Article	1.5%
Martin 2011	Online Behavior Design Expert	Web Article	1.2%
Maslen 2007	Book Author, Sales Copywriter, and Consultant	Book	3.9%
Matz 2008	Marketing Expert	Trade Publication	4.6%
McLuhan 2007	Marketing, Digital Media, and HR Journalist	Trade Publication	0.8%
Michael 2008	Business Development Manager	Trade Publication	0.8%
Nielsen 2007	Academic, Inventor, Internet Usability Expert, and Consultant	Web Article	0.4%
Nordquist n.d.	Book Author and Academic with Ph.D. in English	Web Article	2.7%
Oliver 2006	Book Author and Advertising Copywriter	Book	1.9%
Price 2013	Professional Copywriter	Web Article	1.5%
Resnick 1997	Journalist, Author, Consultant, and Entrepreneur	Trade Publication	1.9%
Robertson 2013	Book Author	Web Article	0.4%
Rubin 2012	Technology Product Development Expert	Web Article	0.4%
Sales Insider 2011	Author Unknown	Trade Publication	1.2%
Sales Leader 2007	Author Unknown	Trade Publication	0.8%
Santucci 2010	Business Consultant, Advisor, Personal Coach, and Professional Speaker	Web Article	0.4%
Senior Market Advisor 2013	Author Unknown	Trade Publication	2.7%
Shipley 2008	Book Author and Journalist	Book	3.5%
Stolley 2010	Academic Expert of Digital Writing	Web Article	0.4%
Tyler 2013	Digital Marketing Strategist	Web Article	2.3%
Wolfel 2013	Sales and Marketing Consultant and Entrepreneur	Web Article	0.4%

- Thirty (30) open-access web articles found on search engines (*Google*, *Bing*, and *Yahoo!*) using "how to write a persuasive email to customers" as the query were identified.
- Twelve (12) articles from trade publications (e.g., newspapers, magazines, and trade journals) found in databases (*ProQuest* and *Business Source Complete*) were found. We broaden the query to "email" in the article title and "business writing" or "business communication" as subjects after getting no hits from the more specific one used with the search engines. There were 184 articles retrieved from this broadened search, but the majority of articles retrieved focused on email technologies, direct email mass marketing, and intra-organizational emailing, rather than one-to-one emails to customers.
- Four common press books on the topic of writing persuasive emails and copy were also included.

Content Analysis

We then employed a content analysis to consolidate, catalogue, and summarize the findings for greater objectivity and reliability. An expert on the topic and lead coder conducted the first pass through the data to consolidate the recommendations by eliminating duplicates: this step resulted in 125 unique email prospecting recommendations. The second pass was used to develop theme categories that could be used to organize all the recommendations. Five overarching themes resulted from an iterative process whereby the lead coder moved back and forth through the data looking for, editing, adding, and modifying categories (Boyatzis 1998; Kolbe and Burnett 1991; Miles and Huberman 1994).

For greater rigor and reliability, two additional independent coders were then used to check the results. Specifically, the template analysis method was used to provide additional coders with *a priori* themes. This method is especially useful when analyzing a large amount of data or when there are multiple coders involved comparing their perspectives for a particular topic (see Cassell and Symon 2004 for an in-depth discussion). The independent coders were each given a code book with the 125 recommendations and the five *a priori* themes with their operational descriptions. Each coder then worked independently to categorize each recommendation. There were few disagreements which attests to the accuracy of the five categories (Rust and Cooil 1994). Five recommendations where there were no pair-wise agreements (i.e., no agreement between any pair of judges: A-B, B-C, and A-C) had to be resolved. A discussion among the three coders revealed this was from too little context around the items (e.g., "tell a story") to clearly identify the meaning and/or one best theme. In those instances the coders went back to the source for contextual clarity and recoded the recommendations. This resulted in agreement with at least two of the three coders for each recommendation.

The inter-rater reliability was then calculated. The proportional reduction in loss (PRL) reliability measure, a "direct extension and generalization of Cronbach's alpha to the qualitative case" (Rust and Cooil 1994, p. 9) was calculated by dividing the total number of pair-wise agreements (n = 271) between the three judges (one lead coder and two trained coders) by the total number of potential pair-wise agreements (n = 375) for a total percentage of agreements (72%). The pair-wise percentage of agreements of 72% corresponds to a PRL reliability of .94 indicating the inter-rater reliability is more than adequate (Rust and Cooil 1994).

INSIGHTS

Measuring Email Effectiveness

The most commonly cited measures for email effectiveness were:

1. Opens – number of recipients who open the email to read it.
2. Click-throughs – number of recipients who click on a link provided within the email.
3. Conversions – number of recipients who respond to the email's call-to-action (e.g., calling/placing an order, signing up for a newsletter, donating, requesting more information, etc.).

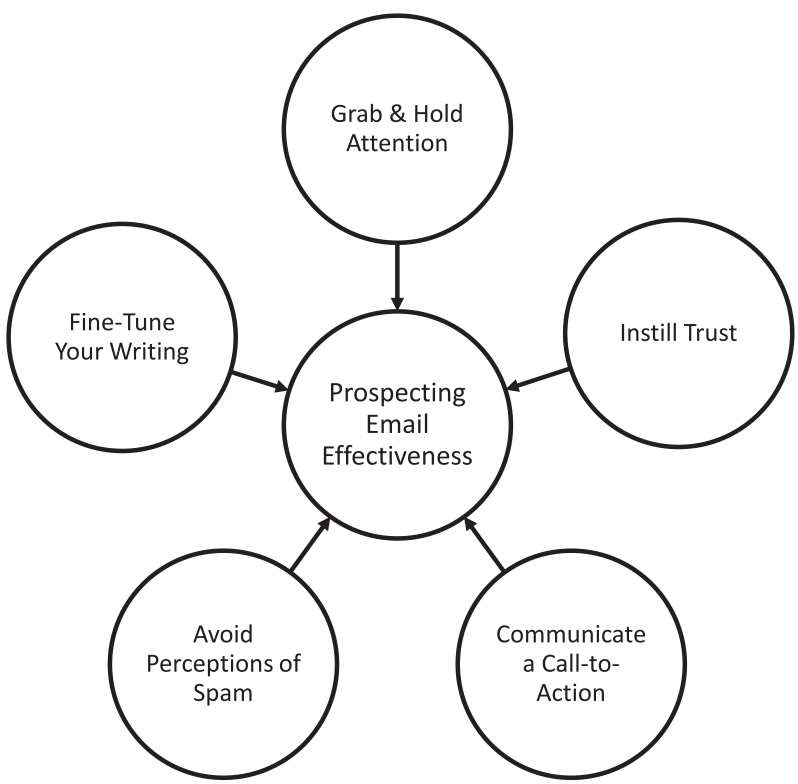
MailChimp reports average open rates and click-through rates for almost 50 different categories of content based on emails deployed by seven million users from its email software system. Average open rates range from 13% for daily deals-related content to 31% for hobbies-related content; and average click-through rates range from 1.58% to 6.65% (MailChimp n.d., a). According to Yesmail (2014) salespeople specifically sending business-to-business emails can expect open and click-through rates of about 18.7% and 1.5% respectively, based on its five billion emails deployed from Yesmail's email software system (Yesmail's analysis included emails to both current and prospective customers, so salespeople sending emails to prospects may see even lower open and click-through rates).

Improving Email Effectiveness

Communications experts cite many different ways to improve email effectiveness. First, executives won't read an email that isn't personalized or appears to be a generic email blast (Santucci 2010). Second, emails are less likely to be opened and responded to the longer they sit in an inbox. Therefore, salespeople should aim to send emails when their recipients are most likely to be checking their inbox. The best times are between 8-9 a.m. and at around 3 p.m. according to GetResponse's analysis of 21 million emails deployed from its email software system in 2012 (Andrzejewska 2012).

Across the board, however, communications professionals agree that content, more than anything else is "king." In order to increase email effectiveness content in prospecting emails should: 1) quickly grab attention, 2) build trust, 3) communicate a call-to-action for the recipient, 4) avoid spam perceptions and spam filters, and 5) be finely tuned for effective language choices, format, and length (see Figure 1). The Guide for Writing Persuasive Prospecting Emails is focused on these central content-related themes and suggests specific ways that salespeople can enhance their email effectiveness in each of these five categories.

FIGURE 1: Core Concepts in Writing Persuasive Prospecting Emails



GUIDE FOR WRITING PERSUASIVE PROSPECTING EMAILS

A list of techniques is provided, but which elements of the guide should be used will vary depending on the situation and the salesperson's objectives. At times different recommendations may seem to conflict. For example, when writing subject lines to grab the prospect's attention, salespeople should accurately reflect the content of the email but at the same time ensure the subject line is tantalizing enough to get the reader to open it. This is an unfortunate paradox when also combined with the recommendation to avoid words that trigger perceptions of spam (e.g., clearance, free, bargain, sales, call, etc.) because it is those words that are often the most tantalizing to readers. Therefore, while the Guide provides a variety of suggestions to improve email effectiveness, it is up to the salesperson to compare the choices available and pick the best for the situation.

1. Grab and Hold the Prospect's Attention

Effective prospecting emails require that the recipient do three things: open it, process the information, and then act as requested. It is the action taken by the recipient that is most critical, but the first two steps are essential precursors. There are a variety of ways to grab the prospect's attention. It is important to consider the email recipient's role within the purchasing process, and the personal profile of the prospect when choosing which ones to use. This allows the salesperson to tailor the message for maximum effectiveness. Here are suggestions for grabbing and holding attention. The email subject line, opening line, and postscript are three hot spots of email that require special attention (Kawasaki 2012).

Subject Line

The subject line is particularly tricky to craft: it has to compel the prospect and accurately reflect the message, while also avoiding spam filters and firewalls that flag email as "Junk" mail.

- Leave out trickery. Subject lines should always accurately reflect the content (FTC 2009). Do not use a ruse to get the prospect to open your email. Tricking the recipient into opening your email is shortsighted, unethical, and will damage you and your company's reputation. Every executive can tell a story of how they were duped into opening an email, but none tell how this led to an outcome that favored the salesperson. If the subject line says "important message" then it better be really important to the prospect (Colombo 2000; Cuciniello 2013; Maly 2012), but beware that "urgent" messages may be blocked as spam (Mailchimp n.d., b).

- Make the subject line highly relevant and tantalizing. For example, indicate what the reader will receive or how they'll benefit from opening the email; communicate a topic that means something important to the prospect (Ellis n.d.; James 2014; Nordquist n.d.).

- Slow down the reader by including numerals. Try using specific numbers such as an actual amount other customers have saved by using your product (e.g., "$4,570"), or "3 tips for cost-cutting" (Duistermaat 2013; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012). Eye-tracking studies have found that numerals tend to slow down readers and attract attention because they may be perceived as representing important facts (Nielsen 2007).

- Quantify the time commitment if possible. Try "3 quick questions" or "5 minutes could reduce costs by 5%" (Ciotti 2013; Duistermaat 2013; Friedman 2012; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012; Insider Sales 2011).

- Write your subject line to demonstrate your message is highly personalized, such as "I love your products," "Sue recommended I get in touch," "Ideas for [recent happenings with their company]," "Question about [recent happening with their company]," and "Have you considered [a recommendation]." Another option is to use your prospect's first name in the subject line such as "John, quick question for you" (Kawasaki 2012; Senior Market Advisor 2013; Tyler 2013).

- Have an important and time-sensitive subject line to instill urgency to respond such as "Webinar starts in 1 hour" (Senior Market Advisor 2013).

- Keep the subject line to a maximum of seven words or 50 characters. One consulting firm found that a two-word subject line is ideal for maximizing open-rates (Bellows 2012). Subject lines should be long enough to accurately describe the email content, but short enough so that the prospect can read the entire subject line when scanning it in their email inbox (Cuciniello 2013; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012). Although 50 characters may be fully readable from a computer, that length may be too long for some mobile phones so cut out unnecessary words. In fact, half of all emails opened occur from a mobile device (Experian 2014). When writing subject lines for mobile phone readers, capping the characters to 35 is ideal: although Android mobile phones wrap the subject line text to the second line, iPhone mobile phones cut off the subject line text at about 35 characters.

Opening Line(s)

- Tell a story that creates an emotional connection to gain interest. One way is to describe a customer's positive experience they've had with you. Retell their experience (in their own words) of how they *feel* when using your product or service (Hershkowitz-Coore 2012). However, don't use the customer's name or company name unless given permission.

- Avoid describing your product with vague adjectives. What exactly is "excellent service," "high quality," or a "beautiful assortment"? Help the customer create a mental image of what you're talking about—give specific details and concrete examples (Oliver 2006; Price 2013). For instance, rather than stating you offer a "high quality product" try stating what makes it high quality such as "indestructible carbon fiber".

- Focus on the prospect. Write about him/her, and avoid using "I" or "me" but instead use "you" and "your" (Duistermaat 2013; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012; Matz and Tier 2008).

- Encourage interactivity and ask a question as you would in a face-to-face meeting (Cuciniello 2013; Dalton 2004; Duistermaat 2013; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012). Ask a question your value proposition addresses which aligns with the prospect's problem. For example, you might ask: "Is reducing cost a priority?" or "Are you looking to acquire new customers?" (Tyler 2013).

- Demonstrate that the prospect was specifically chosen to receive your email. You can do this by communicating exclusivity and preferential treatment (i.e., not everyone is getting this email) or making them the first to know about something (Marsh 2013; Senior Market Advisor 2013).

Closing

- Close with a question (Resnick 1997; Wolfel 2013). For instance you might ask, "What additional information would you like me to include in my follow-up email?" This type of question lets the prospect know you aren't going away unless specifically told to do so.

- Clearly state your call-to-action and what you want the prospect to do next (Stolley 2010). For example, "Joe, by simply clicking on the link provided you can access our inventory and can compare our products to your current provider."

- Use a postscript (P.S.) to catch the prospect's attention. For example, give additional information that might get them to go back and view the email more carefully (Connick n.d.; Matz and Tier 2008).

2. Instill Trust

Prospects want to like and trust the people with whom they do business. Salespeople who are authentic and able to successfully signal credibility are more likely to be perceived as honest and trustworthy (Wood, Boles, and Babin 2008). There are several tactical solutions for instilling trust in a prospecting email.

Be Likeable

- Have good manners. Be positive, acknowledge they are busy, let the prospect know you will accept the burden of following up, say "please" and "thank you," be brief but not blunt, and show their response will be valued and appreciated (Cuciniello 2013; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012; Nordquist n.d.;

Shipley and Schwalbe 2008). Additionally, avoid saying "thank you in advance" as this may come off "as snotty and a command crudely cloaked in premature gratitude" (Shipley 2008, p. 130).

- Avoid requesting too much effort by the prospect before building rapport and agreement. Establish a connection with the prospect before presenting your call-to-action (Maly 2012). Consider excluding links to more information in the first email contact as it could be perceived as assumptive, pushy, and desperate (Ciotti 2013). Nobody likes to be told what to do, especially from a stranger. In some cases, such as when writing to a highly influential decision-maker, consider asking for nothing in the first email you send (Ciotti 2013). Use it as an opportunity to introduce yourself.
- Mirror the prospect's communication style if s/he responds to you. Match her/his email length; don't respond with one word to their very detailed message, and don't write a long message to their short one (Hershkowitz-Coore 2012). This is the equivalent of increasing likeability by mirroring prospects' nonverbal behaviors in a face-to-face setting (e.g., leaning forward and smiling per Kulesza et al. 2014).

Build Rapport

- Emphasize the connection you have with the prospect and what you have in common (Maslen 2007). Do your homework on *Google*, *LinkedIn*, and *Facebook*. Cite specific previous interactions you may have had, mutual connections, or similar interests (Ciotti 2013; Fralic 2013; Friedman 2012; Martin, Ngo, and Leung 2011; Shipley and Schwalbe 2008).
- Avoid fake rapport-building statements that lack personalization such as "how are you today?", "have a great day," and "happy Friday" (Hershkowitz-Coore 2012). Give a sincere compliment instead, or wish them luck on an important upcoming event such as a merger or new product launch (Ciotti 2013).
- Don't waste the prospect's time with irrelevant stories, jokes, and cleverness. Quickly get to the incentive on why s/he should respond right away (Ciotti 2013). Relevant customer stories are acceptable, but they should be applicable and concise.

Be Credible

- Support your claims. Prove what you're saying with testimonials, facts, studies, hard data, an explanations of how things work, before and after photos, etc. (Hershkowitz-Coore 2012; James 2014; Mann n.d.; Price 2013).
- Show your expertise by including commentary on recent news (such as a new discovery or a newly passed regulation) in the prospect's industry (Connick n.d.).
- Create a good reputation for yourself, not by stating it but by demonstrating it. Establish who you are by giving examples of how you've helped other customers. For example, describe a time when you went above and beyond what was expected of you rather than simply stating you're "highly reliable" (Marsh 2013). As with previous recommendations involving customer information, don't use the customer's name or company name when soliciting business from another unless given permission. If it's necessary to keep it generic rather than stating the customer's name and organization, you might say, "Last year I worked with a customer in a similar industry who faced the same challenges within her organization as you might be facing in yours."

Be Genuine

- Write with a conversational voice. Craft the email as though you are talking to your customers and let your personality come through by using words and expressions unique to you. An easy way to accomplish this is to call your own telephone number, leave a message as if it were for the prospect, and then transcribe it for your email (Connick n.d.; Duistermaat 2013; Gardner 2013; Maslen 2007; Robertson 2013).

- Use a closing statement that isn't pretentious or contrived. If you're not Italian then don't close with "ciao!" and avoid "take care" and "best of luck" as this may give the impression that you know something the prospect doesn't. Try "all the best," "warm regards," and "thank you" for less formal emails and "sincerely," "cordially," and "respectfully" for more formal emails (Hershkowitz-Coore 2012).

Demonstrate Confidence

- Concisely state why you've sent the email; confidence comes from precise writing based on a clear understanding of the problem being solved (Ciotti 2013).

- Address prospects by their first names, not last to avoid false respect for authority and to also convey you're at the same level (not below) your prospect (Marsh 2013). However, be cautious because this could backfire with some prospects who expect more formality. A good rule to follow when it comes to using the prospect's name in an email is to write what you'd normally say in a face-to-face encounter. If, for instance, you would address the CEO by surname in person, don't switch to the first name when sending email, and vice versa. With either approach, don't overuse the prospect's name in the email as it will sound too much like a call-center script (Duistermaat 2013).

- Don't overuse "please" and "thank you" as it may come across as begging or being desperate. So rather than write "please take a look at this…" try instead approaching your prospect with a mutually beneficial opportunity such as "You might enjoy reading this…" (Ciotti 2013).

- Anticipate and address their fears before they even think of them by addressing their top three objections in a natural manner (Maly 2012).

3. Communicate a Call-to-Action

Persuasive calls-to-action should be specific, clearly understood, and immediately actionable (Martin, Ngo, and Leung 2011). Hence, before writing prospecting emails salespeople should have a clear idea as to what they want the prospect to do. Some examples include replying back to the email, calling, subscribing to a newsletter, accepting an invitation to attend an event or participate in a meeting, visiting a website for more information, and buying now. The first step is to choose one goal for the email: what do you want your prospect to do and by when? Choose one goal otherwise you risk confusion (Ciotti 2013).

Your goal will drive the specific call-to-action that is communicated in the email as well as how the effectiveness of the email is to be measured. Measurement provides an understanding of what works and what doesn't and an opportunity for continuous improvement. For example, if the goal is to get the prospect to agree to a meeting, then the call-to-action should be an explicit request for a meeting; and the metric that is tracked is the number of meetings scheduled and/or completed. Well written calls-to-action are critical to measuring the success of your email prospecting efforts.

- Be specific about what the prospect should do next. Make your request direct and obvious by putting it on a separate line, not hidden within a paragraph (Cuciniello 2013; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012). If your call-to-action is to have the prospect click through to a web page, then emphasize that hyperlink with an action verb, such as "visit this web page for more information about [product xyz]" (Mann n.d.).

- Motivate the prospect to respond by providing a deadline for offers and incentives. Consider including a due date in the subject line (Cuciniello 2013; Duistermaat 2013; Ellis n.d.; Email Excellence 2012; Mann n.d.).

- When asking questions, narrow the range of options down to two or three and ask them to pick one such as "which day next week works best for you to meet: Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday?" or "which product are you most interested in: the entry model or the commercial model?" (Cuciniello 2013).

- Focus on next steps or reiterate a point you don't want to be lost such as a key deadline in the last closing sentence (Email Excellence 2012; James 2014).

4. Avoid Perceptions of Spam

It's important for salespeople to avoid spam filters when crafting attention-getting emails. Spam is the online equivalent of unwanted door-to-door solicitation. It is most often sent in mass distribution with little effort by the sender to segment the market or to personalize the message. Unfortunately, aggressive spam filters and firewalls may prevent legitimate non-spam emails from reaching the intended inbox. The best way to avoid spam filters is to understand what causes filtering.

Every spam filter and firewall is configured differently, but generally, emails will get flagged as spam when they attempt to gain attention by: talking about lots of money, describing a breakthrough, containing an urgent matter, and offering a money back guarantee (Mailchimp n.d., b). Additionally, writing in all capital letters, using too many exclamation points, and including sales-pitch phrases or generic terms like "Click here!", "Free Trial!", or "Once in a lifetime opportunity!" are also likely to trigger spam filters to dump emails into junk folders (Mailchimp n.d., b). Sales managers and instructors are encouraged to review *The Ultimate List of Email SPAM Trigger Words* provided by email marketing firm, HubSpot (available at blog.hubspot.com). However, note that while this list may be a helpful resource, HubSpot received quite a bit of commentary from email marketers, most of whom commented that spam filters are much more sophisticated and use more complex algorithms beyond simply word-scanning to identify spam. We encourage sales managers and instructors to at least be aware of potential trigger words, and for salespeople to avoid combining too many of them into a single email as a precaution against prospective firms using less sophisticated spam tools that simply scan key words. Additionally, to avoid legal penalties associated with spamming allegations, sales managers and instructors are encouraged to read more on this topic from the Federal Trade Commission (See *CAN-SPAM Act: A Compliance Guide for Business* available online at www.business.FTC.gov).

Emails that don't get flagged by spam filters still run the risk of being perceived as spam by the reader. Prospects have learned to tune out fancy looking emails that look too "corporate," because they are an indication of spam or mass email (Krogue 2010), which is why some experts suggest keeping emails simple with text-only formatting and no artwork (i.e., colorful headers and footers). One research study comparing evaluations of the salesperson (i.e., friendliness, experience, knowledge, credibility, and trustworthiness) for low and high visually appealing prospecting emails reports:

> "While fancy emails full of graphics and photos may be visually appealing they are also not the best choice for an initial-contact email. Do not send highly visual initial-contact emails. Stick to text-based formats when possible…There is one exception to this rule. Including a company logo may signal credibility and thus should be used in situations where perceived credibility may be especially low" (Dapko and Artis 2014, p. 261).

In the Dapko and Artis study (2014) text-only email resulted in more favorable evaluations of the salesperson: the email with the visuals seemed like a generic-mass email whereas the text-only email seemed like a personalized one. Hence, salespeople should make a concerted effort to focus more on executing content-related tips offered in this guide and less on designing a glitzy email. To avoid perceptions of spam, do:

- Omit clever quotations, artwork, fancy headers and footers, photos, and social media buttons to avoid giving the impression you're sending a mass email (Ciotti 2013; Dapko and Artis 2014; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012; Nordquist n.d.).
- Avoid using words that are known spam-catchers (Rubin 2012). Included are: buy, clearance, order, cash, claims, cost, discount, free, money, bargain, investment, price, quote, profits, money, sales, call, and deal.

5. Fine Tune Your Writing

Finally, a persuasive email has proper formatting, an appropriate length, and precise language choices which aid in exciting and moving the prospect toward taking action.

Format & Length

- Avoid bolding, underlining, colors, yellow highlighting, and funky font styles to make your point. If you must use these formats then make sure the emphasized words are important to the prospect (Duistermaat 2013; Duistermaat n.d.; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012).

- Avoid caps, especially with negative words, as it connotes shouting; however, "shouting" a word or two in joy or celebration is acceptable, such as "CONGRATULATIONS," "YOU MADE OUR DAY," or "HOORAY," but use them cautiously, carefully, and kindly (Friedman 2012; Kawasaki 2012; Nordquist n.d.; Sales Leader 2007; Shipley and Schwalbe 2008).

- Enhance readability by using bullet points for lists, adding spaces between paragraphs, writing short sentences, and separating out questions on to their own line or numbering them if you have multiple (Cuciniello 2013; Duistermaat 2013; Mann n.d.).

- Avoid using exclamation points because they may seem too dramatic. The proper cure for exclamation point over-use is to use more descriptive language to replace what would be conveyed with exclamation points (Huppke 2012).

- Avoid using the high priority flag and return receipt request functions (Hershkowitz-Coore 2012). An unsolicited prospecting email will rarely be urgent to the prospect and requesting a return receipt may be perceived as obtrusive. These email options should be reserved for established contacts only.

- Limit your recipients. The more people you send an email to, the less likely any single person will respond to it (Kawasaki 2012). Hold one person accountable by putting only one email address in the "To" line. However, if you must send the email to multiple recipients, then show respect by listing them according to their position within the company (Sales Insider 2011).

- When possible keep your email short, no longer than five sentences, and lead with the most important information (to them). If you find yourself typing "I'm sorry for how long this email is" then your email is too long. A simple guideline to follow is the higher within their organization prospects are, the shorter your email should be. The exception is when your email is mostly praise and you're asking for nothing, then a longer email may be acceptable (Cuciniello 2013; Duistermaat 2013; Fralic 2013; Kawasaki 2012; Martin, Ngo, and Leung 2011; Matz and Tier 2008; Michael 2008; Nordquist n.d.; Resnick 1997).

- Avoid attachments, especially large ones. If you must attach a file then explain its necessity in your message (Ciotti 2013; Colombo 2000; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012).

- Use hyperlinks to share additional information, but make sure the link text doesn't wrap to two lines otherwise the link may not work properly for the prospect (Ciotti 2013; Colombo 2000; Kawasaki 2012; McLuhan 2007). In addition, check to be sure the link works.

Language

- Eliminate outdated phrases (e.g., "as per your request," "attached please find," "in other words," "more than happy," and "please do not hesitate to call"), clichés and overused terms (e.g., "reach out," "touch base," "fast-paced," "thought leader," and "at the end of the day"), words that may make your prospect feel stupid (e.g., "basically," "obviously," "evidently," and "clearly"), and unfamiliar words such as industry-specific jargon (Cuciniello 2013; Hershkowitz-Coore 2012).

- Do use contractions (e.g., "you're," "you'll," etc.). Contractions will keep your language authentic and natural (Matz and Tier 2008; Nordquist n.d.; Shipley and Schwalbe 2008).

- Don't use abbreviations or texting acronyms (Matz and Tier 2008; Nordquist n.d.; Shipley and Schwalbe 2008).

- Write in the active voice. Replace passive verbs with action verbs to make your pitch come alive and your sentences active (Carlozo 2014; Oliver 2006; Matz and Tier 2008). For example, write "we're in the midst of planning for our off-the-charts annual blowout" rather than saying "there is going to be a sale coming up".

AFTER YOU HIT "SEND": TRACK, MEASURE, AND REVISE

Email tracking promotes an understanding of which email versions drive action and which ones get ignored. Prime areas for testing effectiveness include the subject line, the pitch (or value proposition), and the call-to-action; and the best time to test is when there's an opportunity to send emails in larger quantities: when sending information on sales promotions, holiday well-wishes, and major announcements about your company (e.g., product launches, customer acquisitions, hiring employees of substantial industry expertise, etc.).

The process for testing effectiveness requires creating two versions of the email, keeping them as similar as possible, and changing just the part you want to test. For example, if you'd like to test subject-line effectiveness, then send half of your prospects an email with subject line A, and the other half with subject line B. Create a spreadsheet or use your existing customer relationship management email system to note which prospects received which version. Then track which prospects responded to your email. Keep the subject line that resulted in more responses. Next continue this A/B testing for the pitch, and then for the call-to-action. Additionally, salespeople may also consider simply asking prospects what about the email caught their attention and make a note for future improvements.

Crafting compelling emails takes time. We recommend that salespeople first ask their sales managers or marketing departments if research has already been done within their company to understand optimal email performance, and craft emails around those findings first before starting from scratch. Tracking emails also takes time. If a system is not already in place to track and measure, we recommend Sidekick by Hubspot (see sidekick.com) or similar solutions. Sidekick easily integrates with Microsoft Outlook and Gmail and tracks who and what percentage is opening the email (i.e., open rate) and who and what percentage is clicking on hyperlinks within the email (i.e., click-through rate). At the time this article was written, the cost was free for 200 notifications per month.

Getting Started

Writing an effective prospecting email is a challenge. Yet in some sales scenarios, emailing may make for a better contact method than calling, such as when the message is complex and when going through a gatekeeper to reach the decision-maker is unavoidable (Michael 2008). Emails allow the message to be received in full by the intended recipient. It also enables prospects to digest the information on their own terms.

There is no one formula or rubric that works for every target audience. We readily acknowledge there are too many tips offered in this guide to be executed into a single email, and doing so may be frustrating. However, we encourage salespeople to carefully consider the goal for each prospecting email along with the specific characteristics of each prospect and apply some of the tips in this guide—then track results, adjust, and improve accordingly. For salespeople new to writing prospecting emails, we recommend the best way to use this guide is to organize the writing process into seven steps:

1. Start with the body. What is your 30 second "elevator pitch" you use in face-to-face settings? Write that down: explain the problem your product or service solves and give an easy to visualize example.
2. Add a personalized attention-getting statement as your opening sentence. If you've met the prospect before, say so, if not, tell them something interesting you just learned about their company or industry.
3. State what you'd like the prospect to do next in your closing sentence—call, email, click on a link—and that you'll follow up in a few days.
4. Add a respectful salutation: try "Hi John" or "Dear John."
5. Add a sincere sign-off: try "Warm regards" or "Sincerely" followed by your full name, title, company, and phone number(s).
6. Finish with the email subject line. It should accurately summarize your email.
7. Finally, compare your email draft to the Guide tips and correct deviations. For example: replace spam catching words and phrases with something else; try periods instead of exclamation points; and focus squarely on the prospect by rephrasing sentences that use "I" and "me" with "you" and "your."

SUMMARY

There are several practical uses for this research. For salespeople, our instructional guide allows them to quickly expand their knowledge of how to craft persuasive emails, without the hassle of weeding for hours through countless articles and books. The myriad of tips in the Guide offer something new to learn for all experience levels, whether it is a novice or experienced salesperson.

For sales trainers, the Guide is a good way to take mediocre salespeople and quickly boost their email effectiveness. Even for sales stars, the Guide is a good tool to help them fine tune their writing. We recommend trainers organize the training around the five suggested key concepts for writing persuasive prospecting emails (see Figure 1). Each concept can be reviewed separately, or combined, depending on the time allotment for the training and the needs of those being trained.

For managers seeking to hire new salespeople, the Guide could be used as a filtering tool. Sales managers could ask for email samples from prospective new hires and compare them against the advice offered in the Guide. Email samples exhibiting mostly "don'ts" might suggest a poor fitting candidate, especially for salespeople who will frequently use email for prospecting.

There are also academic uses for this research. We conducted a literature review to pinpoint major hot buttons for researching email effectiveness. In doing so we provided researchers with a five-pronged framework to investigate email effectiveness. More rigorous research needs to be conducted to better serve those in sales and in email marketing functions. The next step is for researchers to pay attention to the finer details offered here with the dos and don'ts and then test them.

Those who use this Guide will see favorable results from email prospecting: prospects will pay greater attention to the message, and will be more likely to respond to it, benefiting the salesperson, sales manager, and organization as a whole.

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