

Dennis Sweeny Business Consulting opens doors to close deals

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Dennis Sweeny has built a reputation in the past 20 years as a go-to guy for Kansas City-area companies that need help blazing a trail toward new contracts and breaking into new markets.

Sweeny's company is small, with himself as the main sales guy and one full-time employee who does research. But his effect on the business scene has been huge. His clients include companies such as A. Zahner Co., Armour Swift-Eckrich Inc., Automated

Motion Inc., Havens Steel Co., Knappco Corp., DIT-MCO International Corp., BF Goodrich Aerospace and Gasket Engineering Co.

He starts out researching a company's products and identifying some top buyers in that market. Then he spends several hours a week in a client's office, making cold calls until he gets his foot in the door and can set a meeting. Sweeny's recipe for success is simple: Mix hard work with thick skin, and add in endless determination. He shows his clients how to do it.

"He's a dynamic guy," said Tom Goodpasture, CEO of Liberty-based Pride Manufacturing Co. Inc. "He can talk a language that just about anyone can relate to that just seems to turn into deals. He's a dealmaker." Pride hired him in 2003. In about two years, he landed large new clients such as the U.S. Postal Service, Kawasaki, Mercury Marine and ScriptPro LLC. Goodpasture said the average salesperson comes into a job with an existing client base and typically doesn't have the skills to develop new relationships from scratch. But Sweeny has a special gift for cold calling to do just that.

Sweeny learned those skills over a lifetime, getting his start selling encyclopedias door to door while in college. "That was a tough gig," he said. "I sold one set in the first 10 weeks on the job, but I understood the sales game from that day forward. What makes a good salesman is someone who can go prospect. The ability to find people who are buying what you are selling — that's more important than anything else."

Sweeny said many salespeople make the same big mistake: They cold-call a prospective client, the client doesn't return the phone call or says no, and they immediately give up. He teaches salespeople how to find ripe targets and then stay determined until they get a contract. "Cold-calling is not black magic. It's hard work," Sweeny said. "You just can't take it personal when

somebody doesn't return your phone call 10 times. Getting new customers is painstakingly tedious, but that is how you land big clients."

What most people don't understand, Sweeny said, is that much of selling is gathering business intelligence. "My first six months, I'm just trying to find 20 companies that buy a lot of what I'm selling," he said. "If I've got 20 prospects like this with \$50 million in business, and I can just get 10 percent of that, my client is going to be pretty happy. So I stay focused on those guys since they tell us exactly what we need to do to be successful. All we have to do is listen."

Sweeny said that nine times out of 10, the first quote sent to a new prospect fails. But those failures provide lessons. "I quote you, and you may say no, but I know that you put out \$2 million a year of this business," he said. "I know you have enough business there that if I just continue to establish my client as a decent vendor who is better than your worst vendor, I have a good chance to eventually pick up \$500,000 in business from you."

Sometimes a business will say that Sweeny represented the client well with the quote, but it was only their first quote, and they lost because the prospect just didn't know them well enough. "At that point, the door has been opened for us to wear them down," Sweeny said. "Even if they say, 'I hate you guys,' it's an emotion that's always temporary. You just call them again the next day and hope they forget."

Joel Chambers, sales manager for Mission Plastics North in Grandview, said he hired Sweeny because the business was too reliant on a few customers and needed to diversify and generate new business. Chambers said Sweeny started showing results within nine months. In the past four years, Sweeny has brought in about 10 large new clients, including Kawasaki. Today, those contracts account for about 20 percent of revenue, he said. "His strength is cold-calling and knowing the right questions to ask to get to the right people," Chambers said. "He finds the decision-makers and gets the door open, so people like me with more technical knowledge of our products can get in there and finish the deal." Chambers said Sweeny also helped change the way management looks at business so it focuses on its strengths and puts energy and resources in the most efficient places to grow sales. "In the past, we had 20 to 30 clients we thought we should go after, but it was sort of a shotgun approach," Chambers said. "Dennis challenged us to find our strengths and what markets we complement the best and go after that kind of business. It was the starting blocks for rethinking our entire approach."

Kent Klepper, vice president of sales for Olathe-based Torotel Products Inc., said he has seen results from Sweeny's assistance within six months of hiring him to help break into a new market for Torotel's custom magnetics products. In a year and a half at Torotel, Sweeny personally established contacts with new clients that have the potential to increase sales by \$5 million. He's also now trained Torotel's sales staff to do the same thing, and they are starting to get in front of more clients than in the past. "He's extremely good at assessing the opportunity within a new market," Klepper said. "Going in, we weren't sure exactly what we would get, but immediately we got some new contacts and started getting in front of the right people. It's a skill he has, and he's good at teaching our people how to do that."