SALES PLAYBOOK · PROSPECTING · COLD CALLS

Cold calls, the VGC way.

Short, structured, mostly listening. The full cold-call chapter — openers, the problem menu, SPIN-derived questions, closing techniques and ESC objection handling.

The Objective of a Cold Call

Our objectives are to:

1. Identify if the person you are speaking to has a problem you solve.
2. Find out whether the problem is serious enough to solve.

As a result there are four possible outcomes:

- you book a meeting,
- they don't have the problem,
- the problem isn't big enough to warrant a meeting,
- or you get insufficient information to decide.

We're only ever going to sell to people who have a problem we can solve, so finding out that someone doesn't have our problems is not a failure. The only way a cold call can fail is if you get insufficient information to decide.

Preparing for the Call

You don't need to do loads of research or preparation to make a cold call. The whole thing will last no more than ten minutes and most of that time you'll be asking questions. What you need to know is:

- the problems you solve
- who to call
- the structure of the call
- the questions you will ask
- the objections you'll receive and how to respond

If you find yourself procrastinating over cold calls, make a list of names and numbers on a piece of paper and make the calls away from your desk.

Pattern-Interrupt Openers

To open cold calls we use a pattern interrupt. These are phrases or words your client isn't expecting that disarm their fight-flight-freeze response. Your only objective in the first 30 seconds is to put ice on their emotional reaction and get permission to talk.

Examples

> *"Hi Sarah, it's Ben, we've never spoken before and I suspect I'm calling at the worst possible time. So, can I take 30 seconds to describe exactly why I'm calling, or would you rather not know?"*

> *"Hello Sarah, I'm Ben, we've never spoken before. I have your profile in front of me and noticed two things. Suspect I'm calling at the worst possible time. So would you let me take 55 seconds to explain why I'm calling you out of the blue or would you rather not know?"*

What to watch out for

In this short paragraph you're labelling this as a cold call, telling the person you've done some research on them, acknowledging timing may be bad, making a small ask, and giving them the option. Around 80% of people will invite you to tell them why you are calling and in doing so they've permitted you to begin the conversation.

The Problem Menu

The problem menu is the heart of a prospecting conversation. Before we make any progress in the sale we need to ascertain whether the prospect has a problem that we solve. We will face resistance — some prospects will be wary of telling a salesperson they have a problem; some won't know they have a problem; some truly won't have one. We therefore need to be structured. The problem menu helps our target client feel safe in admitting their problem to us, helps them understand the nature of the problems we solve, and creates curiosity.

Example — running the problem menu

First, we give context that makes our call relevant and credible.

[Context 1]

> *"Jerry, when I talk to Heads of Talent at UK construction firms they tell me the same thing:"*

Next, we tie in some understanding of their position, further increasing our relevance.

[Context 2]

> *They know the way they hire has the potential to be a competitive advantage. But they often find themselves bogged down reducing cost rather than turning recruitment into something that sets them apart.*

With relevance and credibility communicated, we move to the list of problems we are enquiring about.

[Problem A]

> *Some of them say the support they get from their partners prevents hiring from becoming proactive and strategic, and is more a reactive battle to fill roles.*

[Problem B]

> *Others say the speed at which candidate expectations have shifted and the changing shape of the talent market make it hard to get ahead.*

[Problem C]

> *And others are more concerned that the time it takes to fill their roles means they struggle to make meaningful progress in bringing their employer brand in line with their delivery reputation.*

Having shared the examples we now use a negative or reverse close that seeks a 'no' answer. This is the most effective way of progressing the conversation for many reasons.

[Reverse close]

> "*You'll probably tell me that none of those things is affecting you.*"

Questions for Success (SPIN-derived)

Our questions help us establish a number of things:

- First we need to better understand the problem.
- Then we need to understand the value (or impact) of the problem.
- As we do so we're going to seek out our clients' emotional reaction to the problem and the possibility of solving it: no emotion, no sale.
- Lastly we're going to do a brief needs analysis to see what they've tried and what they've ruled out in pursuit of solving this problem.

(This approach is borrowed from the SPIN selling framework by Neil Rackham.)

1. Problem (Probing)

If they acknowledge a problem, avoid the trap of solving anything during the call. Your goal is not to solve the problem but to get the client to recognise that the problem is significant enough to warrant a meeting. Instead, ask more questions.

> *What do you mean by...?* · *Can you give an example of...?* · *Is there a specific time you recall this happening?*

2. Impact

Once we understand the client's perspective, we move on to discussing its impact.

> *How is it affecting your work?* · *How is it impacting the team?* · *Is anyone else affected by this?* · *How long has this been going on?*

Understanding the client's emotional experience of the problem is crucial, not just the facts. Clients are more likely to agree to meet if they believe you can alleviate some pain in their life. Your goal isn't to convince people to meet, but to identify those who should.

- Ask open-ended questions that encourage the client to elaborate on their problems

and needs.
- Listen actively and empathetically to understand their perspective and emotional state.
- Summarise the client's issues and confirm your understanding to build trust.
- Use reflective listening techniques to show that you are genuinely interested in helping them.

Summary

Summarising your client's problems back to them helps in three ways:

1. It checks you've understood correctly.
2. It allows your clients to know you've heard and understood.
3. It enables your clients to be confronted with the situation from a new angle.

Restate the problem, the timeframe and the impact:

> "*I've had my 55 seconds. Can we talk for a couple more minutes? It sounds like [problem]. It has been going on for [time]. It's affecting [things/people].*"

A powerful step is to play it back to them but downplay the severity of the problem.

> *Sounds as though you're doing OK despite this though.* · *Doesn't sound like a top priority for you right now.* · *This really doesn't sound that bad to me.*

Doing this forces the prospect to tell you that, no, the problem really is serious — or admit that it isn't.

3. Need

Ask the client a few more questions to understand the real need:

> *What have you tried to do to fix this?* · *What solutions have you ruled out at this point?* · *Have you given up hope of it ever getting better?*

Top tip: when your client starts saying "I don't know," you're on the right path. This shows you're getting them to think about their problem in new ways.

Trial Close

Test your contact's willingness to meet. Present the purpose, objective and benefits of the meeting. The purpose of a discovery meeting is to understand the prospect's problem and, if relevant, share examples of how we've solved similar issues for others. The objective is to determine whether we can help them. The benefit is that even if we can't help, they will gain insights into how others have tackled similar challenges.

A trial close frames your request as a hypothetical question, allowing you to address any reservations before finalising the meeting.

> *"Look, I'm not certain whether we can help. If I suggested we set aside some time to discuss this issue, how it's affecting you, and share ways other companies have overcome these challenges, would that sound reasonable? What might stop us from doing that?"*

The second question deliberately seeks out objections.

Close

With the problem and its value confirmed, and objections handled, we can now turn to booking the meeting. This should be as simple as finding a date and time.

> *"Do you have your diary? What date are you looking at?"*

Buyer's Remorse

Once you've booked the meeting, check for buyer's remorse. Ask if they truly intend to attend. This taps into the psychological principle of consistency — people are more likely to follow through if they verbalise their commitment.

> *"Steve, I'm looking forward to meeting you. Based on our discussion, I'll prepare some relevant examples from our experiences with other businesses. Can you foresee any reason you might cancel the meeting or decide not to proceed?"*

Why People Object

- They don't have the power or permission to buy
- They don't have the problem you solve
- They don't see you as valuable
- They're scared to be sold to
- They've heard it all before

How to Escape (E.S.C.) — Empathy, Summarise, Clarify

Empathy

OK... · Sure... · Great... · I understand... · Makes sense... · I thought that might be the case...

Summarise

Seems like... · Feels as if... · So to summarise... · Sounds as though... · What I'm hearing is... · If I understand correctly...

Clarify

- How's that going?
- Have you ruled out...?
- Was that your decision?
- What led you to doing that?
- Has that always been the case?
- Why did you opt to do it that way?
- Would you think it a bad idea to...?
- What alternatives have you ruled out?
- How confident are you that is working?
- What do you like about that approach?
- Is it everything you'd hoped it would be?
- How long have you been doing it that way?
- How well is that meeting your expectations?
- If I suggested we tried to find time to ... would you think I was mad?
- If I told you that most of the people we help are in a similar position, would that surprise you?

Worked example — "Don't use agencies"

Empathy: Makes sense...

Summarise: Seems like you've got a good strategy in place.

Clarify:

- How's that going?
- Has that always been the case?
- What do you like about that approach?
- How long have you been doing it that way?
- If I told you that most of the people we help are in a similar position, would that surprise you?

Worked example — "PSL"

Empathy: I thought that might be the case...

Summarise: Sounds like you take your hiring strategy seriously.

Clarify:

- What led you to doing that?
- Has that always been the case?
- Why did you opt to do it that way?
- What do you like about that approach?
- If I told you that most of the people we help are in a similar position, would that surprise you?

Worked example — "Speak to HR"

Empathy: Great. Most of our best relationships include HR.

Summarise: Sounds as though they're in charge.

Clarify:

- Was that your decision?
- What do you like about that approach?
- How long have you been doing it that way?
- If I suggested we tried to find time to... would you think I was mad?

Worked example — "Not Hiring"

Empathy: I thought that might be the case...

Summarise: Sounds as though you are in the same boat most of our clients are when we first speak.

Clarify:

- If I understand it right you're not hiring right now and have no plans to in the foreseeable future?
- If I told you that's why I'm calling now would that surprise you?

Typically our clients say that the thought of hiring in the future makes them a bit anxious, especially when they haven't done it for a while.