

Improving Sales in a Bad Economy

by Mark Hansen

The construction industry still faces tough times, and some of us may not make it. If you intend to stay afloat, you had better analyze every aspect of your business. Defensively, question every overhead cost to see if it can be reduced or eliminated. Then go on the offense — that's how games are won. Put your head down and start swinging.

Get Out There

If you sit in the office waiting for the phone to ring, odds are it won't, as you're just one more name in the phone book. So, get out of your chair and onto the street.

only one person from each industry, which gives you the chance to sell yourself with no other contractors around to compete with. Contractors seem to neglect this opportunity, however: I've been in three different networking groups and in all of them, people commented that they were surprised and pleased to have a contractor join. At any time, three or four real estate agents, loan officers, or advertising agents would be vying for a spot in the group, yet not once did another contractor sign up to fill my position when I left.

You can also network on a smaller scale. I've done a number of jobs for

they will ask about your business. I budget money to take someone out to lunch twice a month. It has been a very good investment.

Past clients are a golden source for current sales, so nurture those relationships. For instance, I always give something to clients to thank them for hiring me. What that is depends on the price of the job. At a minimum I send a hand-written thank-you card, but I might also send flowers or grilling accessories for larger projects. At the completion of a job, I ask clients flat out if they know anyone who may need my services, and I tell them that I appreciate referrals.

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The first thing to do is get in a better mood and stop buying the doom and gloom. If your mood is dark, your customers will see your heart isn't in your work. Snap out of it. Read a motivational book, search Google for motivational quotes to hang in your office. Do whatever it takes to get your mood up; this is when you do your best selling.

Next, join a local networking group. Most chambers of commerce offer networking groups, dinners, or breakfast seminars. Attending these events gets you out in front of people, which dramatically increases your opportunities to sell.

Most networking groups accept

one affluent client who constantly passes my name around. I invited him to lunch the other day to thank him for the referrals and to see what I could learn from him to help me with my business. When I asked him for advice to insure my success, he told me to keep doing what I had done with him; that is, take people to lunch. Most people, even community leaders, are flattered to be invited to lunch.

When I go out to lunch with people, I don't make it about getting them to do business with me. I make it about them, asking how they got their start, what influenced them in their life. After a while, it's only natural that

Evaluate How You Sell

With business being on the slow side, this is a great time to step back and look at your sales procedure.

When you knock on a client's door, you want to stand out from everyone else. Look professional. I'm not talking about a suit and tie, just nice jeans or khakis and a collared, button-down shirt with your business name embroidered on it. The cost for embroidery is minimal, but the picture it presents to your clients is priceless. Carry at least a zip-up note pad; a laptop is better. Have your card in hand to give to the clients right away. When you enter, no matter what the condition of their home is, remove your shoes — even if clients tell you not to worry about it. Tell them it's just a habit. That will impress them.

There are many other ways to impress your clients. For example, a salesman who wanted me to advertise

with his publication called recently. I told him if he took me to lunch, I would listen to his spiel (hey, it's a free lunch!). The first thing he did was set a small, battery-powered DVD player on the table to show a short presentation. The DVD player impressed me; it's quicker and easier to use than a laptop, and I've now added one to my own sales kit.

Another thing that helps close the sale is communication. Two of the biggest gripes clients have is that contractors never show up when they say they will and that they never get back to them with a price. If you say you will show up, do it. If you're going to be more than five minutes late for an appointment, call and let the clients know. If you get an answering machine, leave a message that you are running behind.

Also, get clients a bid as soon as you can. I have even gone out to my truck and figured the bid, then walked right back to the house and knocked on the door to give clients a price. Follow up with a phone call two or three days after you deliver a price. Ask the clients if they have any questions and if they would like you to put them on your schedule. Then shut up and listen. Even if they are quiet, give them time to respond.

If after looking at the project, you don't want to tackle it, politely decline and — if possible — give the clients the number of someone that may be able to help them. They'll remember your help, and if a more suitable project comes up, guess who they'll call?

The point to all this advice is this: Good impressions are viral. You never know who'll mention your name to your next big customer. ♦

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