

# The King of Cold Calls Goes on Call

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I'm an ex-high-school teacher, storyteller extraordinaire, and now executive vice president of NCO Financial Systems in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania. I've been dubbed the King of Cold Calls by friends and associates because of my in-your-face, aggressive style of selling. In fact, I've made over 15,000 cold calls during my 20 year career.

Every once in a while, this style doesn't really work. Sometimes, it takes more than a cold call to get a sale. Sometimes you have to sit down with your clients and slowly build up relationships with them, consult with them, let them use you as resource, and let them know that you are there to help.

I realized this when I began working with the Medical Center of Delaware, a 1,200-bed hospital about an hour's drive from Philadelphia.

Four years ago, I learned that the hospital's director of patient accounting, Dave Charles, used to work at a hospital that my company, which is a collection agency, had been doing business with. I thought, what an opportunity! I had an opening!

I called Dave several times and left messages. He never called me back. Finally, one fall day, I drove down to Delaware to see him. I didn't have an appointment, but I figured I'd nab him with my cold-calling technique.

At first, he wasn't interested. But I didn't give up. I followed up by telephoning him once or twice a week at six or six-thirty

at night; this was the only time I could connect with him at the office. I called him almost every day for a year and a half.

Each time I called, I conveyed to Dave that I honestly wanted to help the hospital reduce its bad debt. I told him that for the last 100 years companies have basically taught people how not to pay bills. What if NCO and the hospital could re-educate everybody to pay sooner? To prioritize payments? I was psyched. I really believed in my ideas. And I was sure he would come around sooner or later.

Finally, he let me test the program.

Why? Because between my pitches and ideas something came across that closed the deal for me. I've been in this field for almost 20 years; if anyone can empathize with what a receivable manager or vice president of finance has to go through in the course of a day, it's me.

I conveyed to Dave-since I believed it as well-that I would be involved in this project only if I could help improve the bill collecting for the hospital. If not, I wasn't interested. In fact, doing it right was more important than getting the sale. Eventually I got him to trust me.

Shortly after the tests, which proved that my services would be perfect for the organization, we went live. And as we went along, I became more and more committed to the project. I really wanted to see this hospital's internal organization improve. It was almost as if the seller buyer relationship had vanished. It was replaced by two individuals who had the same goal. I wanted it to work as much as he wanted it to work; we were both moving in the same direction.

Suddenly, I realized that our process was a success. In fact, in



Chuck Piola

the first 10 months, the hospital reduced bad debt by 5 percent. After two years from the initial start, several million dollars were saved. The fee for our service was absorbed in internal savings, more effective use of personnel, and increased cash flow. What's more, because of this project, the Medical Center of Delaware had enough money to provide free care to the indigent.

One reason the program was so successful was because I was working with a manager who was willing to experiment with something new. He wasn't afraid of change; he welcomed it and my role as a catalyst for it. He took a chance, and he has renewed his contract ever since.

What I've learned from this experience is that when you help your customers get what they need, the money will come. Sure, you can nab them with a cold-call, but its the follow-up and the real commitment that counts.

Selling, after all, is not getting someone, it's not hooking someone, it's not forcing someone to do something that they do not want to do. It's helping a person get something that they need. I knew that this hospital used a collection agency, but I knew that there had to be a better way to do what they were doing-to collect money and handle receivables.

This kind of belief and understanding helped me close that sale.