Is Follow-up an Art or an Attitude?
Tips to Turn Your Attitude into Orders
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by Andy Paul

A sought after speaker and advisor to CEOs and senior sales managers, Andy Paul is a leading expert on sales effectiveness, sales time management and the speed of selling.

Andy is the Founder and Creator of Zero-Time Selling. He is also the author of the award-winning book *Zero-Time Selling: 10 Essential Steps to Accelerate Every Company’s Sales*. Zero-Time Selling was selected as one of the Top 3 Sales & Marketing books of 2011.

For more information, visit [www.zerotimeselling.com](http://www.zerotimeselling.com) or contact Andy directly at andy@zerotimeselling.com.

A Zero-Time Selling eBook
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Not long ago I read a blog posting about the art of the follow-up. I liked the general concept presented by the author, that there are skills we can all learn that will improve the effectiveness of our sales follow-up. It was hard to argue with his premise.

He assumes, of course, that there’s something to follow up on. And this is what trips up many sellers. Before you can follow up on a lead, you have to pick up the phone and establish first contact with a prospect.

I have read studies and statistics about sales follow-up that are uniformly depressing. Somewhere between 40% and 80% of leads are never followed up (depending on which source you believe). (Personally, I think that anything above 0% is a failure of management, but I’ll leave that for another rant. I mean eBook.) No matter which end of the statistical spectrum you subscribe to, the bottom line is that follow-up suffers more from inattention than from ineffectiveness.

To frame this in an even grimmer light, seminal studies, such as the Insidesales.com/MIT Lead Response Management Study, unequivocally demonstrate that it is not enough to
simply follow up. Effectiveness of follow-up is directly tied to how quickly follow-up occurs. The conclusion of the MIT study is stunningly self-evident, but its lessons are blithely ignored by the vast majority of sellers. The study found that the longer you take to follow-up a lead, the less likely you are to ever contact the prospect. In short, any interest a prospect has in talking to you quickly diminishes once they have reached out to you.

Therefore, the central issue in effective follow up is attitudinal. A seller simply has to commit to take action. Quickly. Put aside thoughts of technique until you take an action that would benefit from it.

With clients I like to use the term "equivalence" to describe how they should treat follow-up. Ask yourself this question: how do you want a seller to follow up with you? If you are interested in a company's products and you submit an inquiry, what are your expectations for follow-up? You must have some expectation that the company will get back to you or you wouldn't have expressed interest in their products. Apply an equivalent expectation to your own, or your sales team's, follow-up efforts.

As I prepared to publish and promote my book, *Zero-Time Selling*, I decided to accelerate my learning curve by hiring an experienced consultant who could help me bring it to market with a bang. I attended conferences on book marketing and met with book marketing experts considered to be luminaries in their field. I had the book and the budget to hire the right resource. I met first with Luminary #1, who loved the idea of my book and was excited to talk in more depth about how she could help me. We set a time for a follow-up phone call. She never called and never followed up. Luminary #2 was also interested in helping me get my book to market, and his follow up was as nonexistent as his counterpart's. However, he did take my card and was thoughtful enough to add my name a dozen of his mailing lists, from which I had to unsubscribe.

In follow-up, attitude precedes art, just as form follows function.

I recently searched online for price information about a particular SaaS application that I wanted to use for my business. The vendor offered up only two service options on its website: (1) Professional (Individual) and (2) Enterprise. The company’s website contained no pricing information for either option and no way to purchase the product. I completed an online form asking for pricing information. Two weeks later I got an email response from a sales manager stating that if I wanted price information I had to set up a phone call with her to go over my requirements. Two weeks. In the meantime, I had purchased an alternative solution.

The art of follow-up is less important than the act of follow-up. Commit to being in the game first and then work on your craft.

Key Takeaway: Follow-up technique is less important than “just doing it.”
In any business, every inbound sales lead has the potential not only to become an order, but also to be transformed into a satisfied customer that provides a dependable stream of repeat revenue year after year.

The primary obstacle preventing a seller from converting an inbound sales lead into a repeat customer is the simple act of lead follow-up. On the surface, lead follow-up would appear to be straightforward, but most companies seem to find it difficult. Industry research on sales estimates that 40–50% of all inbound sales leads are never followed up. And, when the leads are followed up, the seller unwittingly makes mistakes that cause him to lose the sale.

Comprehensive and effective sales lead follow-up is a simple step that every company can take to build prospect pipelines and grow sales without increasing headcount.

To develop an effective lead follow-up process it is important to first understand what an inbound sales lead is. A sales lead is simply someone who asks a question: What does your product do? How does it do it? Will it do what I need? What does it cost? And the first seller with the answers wins.

Here are the essential steps that every seller should take to be the first with the answers
and to maximize the conversion of inbound sales leads into orders.

1. **Follow up on 100% of inbound sales leads**
Every inbound sales lead is like a scratch-off lottery ticket. You don't know what you have until you scratch the wax off the face of it and see what you’ve won. How many people buy a lottery ticket and then wait until the next day to see if they have a winner? None. Inbound sales leads should be treated the same way.

Make sure that all inbound sales leads are entered into your CRM system as soon as they are received and that each one is assigned to a salesperson for immediate follow-up. Use your CRM system every day to verify that 100% of your sales leads are being followed up. If you aren't checking, it isn't happening.

2. **Follow up all leads in less than 60 minutes**
How much time should it take to follow up a lead? Less than you think. Research has found that you are 7 times more likely to qualify a lead if the follow-up occurs in less than an hour. Think how many more prospects will move into your pipeline if you respond to 100% of your leads in an hour or less.

Leads have a short shelf-life. For every minute that follow-up is delayed or deferred its value drops. And if your competitors swoop in with answers while you're sitting on your hands, then you’re suddenly fighting for second place.

I worked with one client to streamline lead follow-up and reduce the company’s response time to inbound sales leads from 24 hours to 30 minutes. The immediate result was more qualified prospects in the pipeline. The longer-term result was a doubling of sales with the same number of salespeople.

3. **Provide complete answers quickly**
As noted above, an inbound sales lead is nothing more than a question. Being responsive to a prospect means providing a complete answer to their question(s) in the least time possible. The best way to do this is to position your deepest product knowledge (your most knowledgeable salespeople) closest to the customer. It is not enough to be the first to respond to the customer. You must also be the first to answer their questions. The first seller to respond to an inbound sales lead with the complete answer in Zero-Time will build trust and credibility and dramatically increase their chances of winning the order.

4. **Measure, improve, and measure again**
You must continually work to improve your sales lead follow-up process. As the old saying goes, 'You can't improve what you don't measure.' So keep it simple to start with and measure the following:
   a) How many sales leads do you receive each week?
   b) How long does it take to respond to each sales lead (the amount of time between
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receipt of a lead until a salesperson talks to the prospect for the first time)?

b) How long on average does it take after receipt of a lead until a salesperson talks to the prospect for the first time?

c) What percentage of your inbound sales leads are converted into qualified prospects?

d) What percentage of your inbound sales leads are converted into orders?

Set goals for these metrics and then check each month to see if you are achieving them. If you are, set new, more aggressive goals and fine-tune each element of your lead follow-up process to achieve the new goal. If you aren’t meeting your goals, examine each element of your process in detail and implement steps you can take to improve it. Then check your performance again in a month.

Key Takeaway: Develop a written follow-up process. Follow it.

In follow-up, being responsive to your prospect is faster than being first to respond.
You may think that I’m just playing with words here. But read on and you’ll find that the power of this statement lies in its execution, not its elocution.

What does it mean to be responsive? First, let me tell you what it doesn’t mean. “Responsive” doesn’t mean fast.

Responsiveness in selling has two inseparable elements: information content and speed. Take away one element and you are no longer responsive. Imagine that responsiveness is a molecule like H₂O composed of two elements; hydrogen and oxygen. Take away the H₂ (two hydrogen atoms) and you just have O (oxygen.) That’s great for breathing, but it’s not much use in the thirst-quenching category. Similarly, if you’re fast to respond to your prospects but can’t give them the data and information they need to move forward in their buying process, then you’re not being responsive. Being fast is good way to earn gold medals, but in sales speed is not a virtue if you provide no content.

Your responsiveness, or lack thereof, is your prospect’s first experience with your company. The initial interaction you have with a prospect or customer is judged to be a win or a loss. What do you want the prospect’s first perception of you, your product, and your company to be? Love at first sight? (Whoever loved, that loved not at first sight? —Christopher Marlowe). Or contempt? (Contempt is as frequently produced at first sight as love. —Herman Melville)

Responsiveness is an absolute value. You either are responsive or you’re not. You can’t be partially responsive. Customers are acutely aware of responsiveness in sales. Unfortunately they aren’t on the receiving end of it very often.

For a seller, responsiveness becomes a key competitive advantage in a commodity-oriented world. Your first sales call tells customers what it would be like to work with your company. If you help your customer complete the buying cycle quickly and efficiently, they will begin to expect this level of responsiveness from all companies. The competitors that don’t measure up will find themselves at a distinct disadvantage.

Key Takeaway: Be responsive. Speed helps too.

**Instill a culture of absolute responsiveness in your selling**

1. **Make responsiveness a priority.** Everyone who engages with the customer should be trained to provide sales service and responsiveness that compress the customer’s buying cycle.
2. **Create metrics for your key sales processes.** Set a time limit for responding to a sales lead. Set a time limit for responding to 100% of your sales leads. If you aren’t measuring it, it isn’t happening.
3. **Sell with the sharp end of the stick.** Put your salespeople with the deepest product knowledge closest to the point of attack—that is, closest to the customer. A customer’s
buying process is a search for information to help them make a purchase decision. If your front-line sales people can quickly provide the answers the prospect requires, then your responsiveness will skyrocket.

4. Map your content to the prospect’s buying process. Unless you are selling a brand new product, you should know what content the prospect requires at each stage of the buying cycle to move forward to the next stage. This content has to be in a form that is quickly and easily shared with your prospects.

5. Manage to the metrics. The metrics, and the individual performances against them, have to be reviewed daily. Your CRM system is a perfect tool for tracking and managing responsiveness.

There is an epidemic of poor responsiveness in sales. Some of it is laziness. Some is due to inattentiveness on the part of management. Most often, poor responsiveness is due to a lack of understanding about how important first impressions are in your ability to win a prospect’s business. If you value responsiveness, that will quickly become apparent to your prospect and set you apart from your competitors.

"You only have one chance to make a good first impression." Lois, my mom

What are your sales biases? And how are they slowing your follow-up?

Consider this situation. An experienced salesperson who had been hitting his numbers,
and who was considered to have lots of potential, suddenly stops improving. A year later he has gone from being an up-and-comer to someone who is struggling. Throughout this period you have been coaching him to see if you can get him back on track. Somewhat mysteriously, he didn’t seem to be doing anything differently or wrong. And yet, there he was. Stuck.

One reason salespeople stop improving and start struggling is that they start believing they know what they’re doing. What? Yes, oddly, experience can be the downfall of a salesperson. The salesperson who believes she has it all figured out thinks the path to success is to keep doing things the same way. But your prospects and customers operate in a world that is constantly evolving. They are changing their requirements and behaviors in response to the changing environment. The salesperson with a static worldview will suddenly find herself on the outside looking in.

This salesperson has developed an experience, or sales, bias. The dictionary says that a bias is "the inclination to present or hold a partial perspective at the expense of (possibly valid) alternatives." In this case, the biased salesperson assumes that all customers for her product have the same requirements, evaluate products in the same way, make decisions in the same fashion, and can be sold in the same manner.

Experience-based bias affects outcomes in other fields as well. My wife is a medical educator and recently attended a workshop discussion about doctors’ biases. Researchers had identified 125 possible biases, predispositions if you will, that doctors unconsciously use while evaluating and diagnosing patients. When you are sick and visit a doctor, the physician will, based on his or her accumulated experiences with previous patients, pass your words and symptoms through the filter of 125 biases before arriving at a diagnosis. A story was recounted of a physician whose standard response to any patient with a certain set of symptoms was to say, "Oh, when they say that they are always lying." The impact of these biases can be deadly if life-threatening problems are overlooked and go undiagnosed.

Although selling is not as life-changing as medicine, the problem of experience bias is real. How about this perennial sales bias? "Those are bad leads. I can tell just by looking at them." Or, how about this classic sales bias: "I never trust a lead that I didn't develop myself."

Sales biases can become absolutes in the mind of the seller. To make sure that you aren't being slowed down by your experiences, you must continually fight your biases. Use your experience as a platform to build on. Treat every sales situation as a new learning opportunity instead of as a summer repeat of a sitcom episode.

Key Takeaway: Don’t let your sales biases blind you to valuable opportunities.
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