

THE 7 BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL PROSPECTING AND HOW YOU CAN OVERCOME THEM

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Inside sales and telesales managers will learn:

- » Three simple steps to tripling your success rate over the phone.
- » The one reason a lower level contact will sponsor you to a higher level contact.
- » The top two techniques for building value over the phone
- » Keys to leaving highly effective voicemail.
- » How to overcome the five common challenges to discovering honest needs.

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INTRODUCTION

If you manage an inside sales or telesales team, you realize there are unique challenges to selling and managing customers over the phone. The purpose of this paper is to share with you seventeen years of research in hundreds of organizations that will help you respond to areas that are inhibiting the performance of your inside sales organization.

This paper will describe the seven key barriers to becoming a high performing inside sales organization, and typical ways that well-meaning inside sales reps unsuccessfully encounter them. But more than a description of these barriers, this paper will give you the approach, methods, and tools that will help you successfully overcome them.

BARRIER #1 – Establishing Relationship

Relationship determines influence. Regardless of your selling environment, this principle remains true, but developing a relationship over the phone vs. face-to-face requires an advanced skill set.

There is a barrier that exists when selling over the phone. Decision makers do not feel as vulnerable, as if they were anonymous and not accountable for their actions. They will return emails, work on other documents, and flat out be rude when talking over the phone. This almost never occurs when you are in their office!

The “distance barrier” that exists over the phone is similar to the one that exists while you are driving a car. If you are standing in line with a stranger you wouldn’t try and cut in front of them or get right behind them so they will move faster - but in a car, because you don’t really know who I am, I have the “freedom” to behave completely differently.

Since the distance barrier exists, successful inside sales representatives (ISRs) have mastered the ability to create the same intimacy over the phone as they would face-to-face. They understand that the decision maker has three criteria they

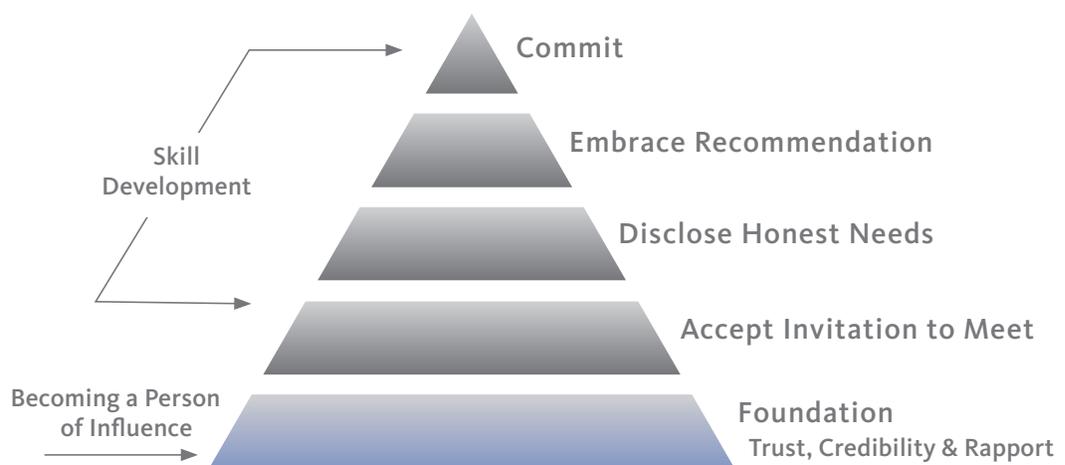
The ability to establish trust, credibility, and rapport over the phone requires a very unique skill set.

use to quickly determine, sometimes in the first ten seconds, whether they are willing to engage, reveal needs, and embrace the ISR’s recommendation.

» Research shows that to effectively build a relationship over the phone, reps must learn to establish this foundation of trust, credibility, and rapport (TCR).

Although establishing this foundation is required when selling face-to-face, the ability to establish trust, credibility, and rapport over the phone requires a very unique skill set. To assess your team’s ability to establish relationships with their customers based on a foundation of TCR, ask the following questions:

- » Can your team identify the four communication styles over the phone and have the skills to adjust their approach to match those styles?
- » Does your team try to sell or persuade when the customer is emotionally unreceptive?
- » Does your team understand how to approach the decision maker as a peer by gaining insight on their role, business objectives, and decision-drivers? (If your ISRs are generically calling to discuss product or services or “touching base,” they aren’t leveraging their true ability to connect as peers.)



BARRIER #2 – Gaining Access

Face-to-face selling usually begins with a meeting with a decision maker or key influencer. Over the phone, you are required to navigate the multiple barriers the organization has set up to keep you from accessing the decision makers. From the receptionist to the decision maker's personal assistant, gaining access is not easy and to be successful you must find your way in.

Assess Your Own Organization

Depending on what you sell, you may face different types of accessibility issues when it comes to speaking with decision makers.

To assess your team's ability to gain access, ask yourself:

- » Do they fully exploit the opportunity to speak with the receptionist to gain insight on key players?
- » Do they leave a lot of voice mails or send a lot of emails without response?
- » When working with the evaluator, are they prohibited from reaching out to the higher level influencers?
- » Do they often work with the buyer or evaluator (i.e., the people that "make it happen") at the last stages of the customer's buying process vs. consulting with the decision maker (i.e., the person that "determines what happens") early in the planning process?

Successful ISRs actually don't see the screen as a barrier, but as an incredible resource. They value the fact that there is someone who is consistently available to set up meetings with a person who is very difficult to reach, as well as someone who can provide very helpful information.

Navigating the Barriers: Receptionists, Personal Assistants, and Voice Mail

To ensure your reps are equipped to gain access, here are some keys to helping your ISRs successfully navigate the barriers and get higher within the organization.

Receptionists

It amazes me how often reps will bypass the one person in the organization that is paid to talk to everyone – and not only that, they have a list of the names of all the key players, their titles, direct numbers, and email addresses.

- » The receptionist can play a critical role in helping you determine your customer's organizational structure, as well as providing you with information that can help you connect with all the players.

Here's how high performing ISRs work with receptionists:

- » If you have a name, ask the receptionist for their title. If the title seems unqualified, ask for their boss, and then their boss, until you have determined the organizational structure (e.g., data manager reports to Director of IT who reports to the VP of Operations, who reports to the CIO). It may take several calls, but it's much better than getting stuck

at the lower level or calling the wrong contact for weeks.

- » To determine email or direct phone number, offer your best guess and have the receptionist correct you (e.g., "I have John Williams as jwilliams@xyz.com; is that correct?")
- » Always assume that any name given to you by the receptionist is wrong. I have never met a decision maker who tells the receptionist to give their name out when sales reps call. Receptionists are given a pre-determined name to route all sales calls. So don't fall into that trap. Again, ask polite but direct questions about the person's title. If unqualified, ask for the head of the relevant department ("I'm not sure that is the right person. Can you tell me who is over your IT department?"). Again, assume that it will be the wrong contact. Just keep asking who they report to until you have all the players.
- » If the receptionist is unable or unwilling to help, look for a coach. In other words, look for someone in the organization that has an understanding of the key players or organization with whom you are trying to connect, but will not assume the role of decision maker. Try to pick a role that will not draw suspicion of the receptionist like a customer service or sales rep.

Personal Assistants, Screens & Gatekeepers

Most reps view the toughest barrier to reaching the decision maker is the personal assistant or "screen". Why? Their primary job is to manage the calendar and act as a filter to determine who gets access. Successful ISRs actually don't see the screen as a barrier, but as an incredible resource. They value the fact that there is someone who is consistently available to set up meetings with a person who is very difficult to reach, as well as someone who can provide very helpful information.

Here are some keys to working with a personal assistant or "screen":

- » Their job, as referenced above, is to determine who should be given access to this high ranking person. To build a relationship with the screen, help them do their job. Don't use manipulative tactics or view them as a barrier; work with them to determine if you can provide a relevant solution. By doing this you will build a positive relationship with them, thereby improving your chances of getting them to sponsor a meeting, not to mention providing you with extremely valuable information along the way to appropriately position your solution.

- » Treat the screen as the decision maker. Communicate that you would like to ask them questions about their company to determine if your solution is a fit. Once you go through the preliminary Discovery Meeting with the screen, you can then provide relevant benefits of your solution – improve the odds that they will sponsor or setup a meeting with the decision maker.

Voice Mail

Once you have the right number, you often still have to leave voice mail. Often reps will tell me that they don't leave voice mail. Well, the successful ones do – and here's why.

- » On average, 4% of the time someone will call you back. More importantly, if you leave a good voice mail, you are establishing a positive relationship with the decision maker. In doing so, he or she will be much more likely to respond positively when they finally answer the phone, or in responding to an email from you.

Here are the keys to leaving an effective voice mail message that will sometimes get returned – but more importantly warm up the decision makers:

- » You have a brief time to gain the decision maker's attention.
- » The best approach is to communicate the problems you address and not focus on what your product or solution does.
- » Additionally, provide relevant examples/ success stories that will create interest and establish credibility (e.g., "We have been very successful working with companies like yours – xyz, abc & 123 – to address the challenges of ____."). People are focused on their challenges, goals, and barriers to success. If you address those, I promise they will listen. Worst case – they don't call you back but are immediately receptive if you finally connect live.
- » When approaching strategic decision-makers, do the necessary research to ensure that you gain insight on their specific objectives before leaving a voice mail. The more specifically you address their problem the more likely the call will be returned. A rep from a high-tech firm gained access to the CEO of a \$2.5 billion company by communicating that he was calling about a specific problem they had with system integration. He got a returned phone call and a \$3 million deal.

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BARRIER #3 – Engaging the Actual Decision Maker

The first 15 to 30 seconds of the phone call – also known as engaging – is where most “C” and “B” grade reps fail. Even seasoned sales pros are uncomfortable making that introductory call to a new decision maker. Why? Because the key to being successful in the first 15 seconds of the call is counter-intuitive to what most reps naturally want to do or have been taught.

To be successful at initiating new relationships, reps first need to understand the psychology of selling over the phone.

- » In over 17 years of studying customer’s buying habits when being approached via the phone, our research has shown that when called by a sales rep they are unreceptive or “emotionally closed” 80% of the time.
- » Understanding the emotional state of the customer is essential to engaging the decision maker. When someone is emotionally closed and you try to persuade them with logical arguments (e.g., here’s why my product or service is right for you), they become more closed. And what does most every rep in America do? Fight or flee – and neither strategy is effective.

When asking for the opportunity to discuss and learn about them, demonstrate that you have done your homework and that you have some understanding of what’s important to the decision maker.

Decision-makers reject sales calls, not solutions

Your prospects or customers are not rejecting a product, service or solution – they are rejecting a sales call. Therefore, you need to change your approach from selling, to creating an environment where you reduce the customer’s anxiety and ensure the customer is open and receptive.

Here are three simple steps to tripling your success rate in initiating relationships with new prospects/customers:

- 1. Don’t sell.** 80% of decision makers are emotionally “closed” because they, like us, have all experienced pushy, confrontational sales reps. Therefore, the key to connecting with them is to act the opposite. So instead of “pulling-the-rope” – trying to force the decision maker in your direction – “drop-the-rope”. Communicate that you are not sure if what you offer is a fit, ask permission, complement their current supplier, speak in a relaxed, nonthreatening tone. All of these behaviors communicate that you have “dropped-the-rope” and are demonstrating that the customer has the freedom to choose.

- 2. Ask to learn more about them.** Secondly, high performing ISRs focus on getting agreement to the easiest next step a prospect can make – a Discovery Meeting. Many reps make the mistake at this very early stage in the sales process of asking the decision maker if there is a need. They answer will most likely be “no.” Instead, ask for an opportunity to learn about their key objectives and then they can decide (“dropping-the-rope”) if it makes sense to move to the next step.

- 3. Do your homework and let them know.** When asking for the opportunity to discuss and learn about them, demonstrate that you have done your homework and that you have some understanding of what’s important to the decision maker. This not only ensures instant credibility with the decision maker, but it also demonstrates that you have an other-centered objective vs. trying to sell your product or service (self-centered).

BARRIER #4 – Moving Up

Because ISRs do not have the luxury of walking around the customer's/prospect's facilities, they do not have the same opportunities to expand their relationships within an account as field sales representatives (FSRs) do. They often get "stuck" with the person who they initially contacted, who is often more of an evaluator or buyer than the decision maker. This leads to a "Catch-22" situation:

- » If you try to go around your existing contact and go higher up in the organization, you risk hurting your relationship with the one contact you do have. But if you stay at the lower level, you could lose the account/opportunity altogether – at a minimum, you are at risk.

Here are some simple tactics that successful ISRs use to advance higher up in the organization.

- » If calling the account for the first time, before connecting with the given contact, determine all the key players (the receptionist is typically pretty helpful). Contact the highest ranking decision maker first. Whether you connect with them or not, you can establish your connection at

Contact the highest ranking decision maker first. Whether you connect with them or not, you can establish your connection at the higher level. Even if you don't need to connect at that level, you have established credibility with the lower level contact and demonstrated that you belong at that level.

the higher level (e.g., "Bob, I was referred to Judy Smith and I'm in the process of setting up a meeting, but I wanted to connect with you as well to get a better understanding of ___ ") By first establishing a relationship at the higher level, it removes the roadblock, "Please do not contact Judy Smith" or my boss. You are already there. Even if you don't need to connect at that level, you have established credibility with the lower level contact and demonstrated that you belong at that level.

- » Gain sponsorship by demonstrating credibility. There is only one reason that a lower level contact will agree to sponsor you to a higher level decision maker – it will improve their political clout within the organization. So to gain sponsorship, you must demonstrate that you have the expertise to provide a solution at the higher level. To demonstrate expertise, ask questions that can only be answered at a higher level or creatively look for ways to demonstrate your solution will provide value at higher levels in the organization.

- » Lastly, gain access by creating a process or event that will include introductions to key players. An event that is perceived by the customer as a needed step in evaluating your solution/product and is relatively easy for the lower level evaluator to make a case that the key players should attend. For example, you could offer an assessment of their existing organization and then ask to present the assessment findings to the key stakeholders. Other ideas include:

- set up best practice meetings where you organize a meeting with leaders in the same industry (non-competing); or,
- coordinate an event where your executives meet with their executives, required as part of the initial phase of working together – this is a meeting with key leaders to determine needs.

BARRIER #5 – Discovering Honest Needs

There are multiple barriers to conducting a successful Discovery Meeting over the phone.

- » The decision maker can become easily distracted. Because of the distance barrier, trust and rapport are low.
- » The ability to read body language disappears.
- » The ability to demonstrate that you are listening is greatly diminished.

But because discovering honest needs is the most critical step in selling, developing this competency is vital.

Reps who have not developed the skills to conduct a Discovery Meeting over the phone will struggle with uncovering the honest, unrestricted information that reveals the real decision-drivers and the needs/challenges at the core of the organization. Discovering these will ultimately determine the success of their sales efforts or at least will ensure that they are not wasting their time on unqualified accounts.

Successful inside sales organizations have learned to address this unique skill set and have equipped their reps to lead a successful Discovery Meeting where honest needs and challenges are revealed.

To improve the level of information captured during discovery, consider these common challenges to discovering honest needs:

Our only hope for ultimately influencing the customer's decisions is to thoroughly complete discovery and gain the necessary information to position your solution in a relevant way.

1. Reps are uncertain as to how to ask questions that effectively initiate discovery.

All too often, reps are so focused on their agenda when initiating a Discovery Meeting, that they forget the customer altogether and resort to asking close-ended questions to "check-off" the information they are looking for. ISRs who fail to ask open-ended questions will find the customer very resistant to investing in the discovery process, and therefore will be unsuccessful in discovering the customer's honest needs:

- » So instead of asking close-ended questions like, "How many ___ do you have/need?"; "What suppliers are you using?"; "Who's in charge of ___?"; or "How long have you ___?"; ISRs should ask open-ended questions like, "Susan, I know you are currently heading up ____. Can you tell me more about your key objectives for this year and where are you in accomplishing those objectives?"
- » If you focus your questions on learning about the customer and where they are heading vs. what you would like to know/ what's on your screen/questionnaire to fill out, you will greatly enhance your chances of success.

2. Customer's assumption that all sales reps are self-serving.

Something that is particularly challenging during discovery is the fact that customers assume that sales reps' motives are completely self-serving. So when they don't know why you are asking certain questions, they will assume the worst and very likely not offer any valuable information. Therefore, reps must take every opportunity to communicate the opposite – and one way to do this is by asking questions in a way that communicates your other-centered reason for asking it:

- » The key is to prime the question by providing a customer-focused reason for your question. For example, instead of asking "Where are you currently buying ___?"; prime the question with an other-centered reason: "So that I can make sure to connect the dots about what's important to you, where are you currently buying ___?"

3. Reps' lack of knowledge. If a decision maker has to spend time getting you up to speed on the basic facts about their business, their interest in discovery greatly diminishes. The rule of thumb is, don't ask the decision maker for information you can easily get from some other source.

» By conducting some research on the business you will be able to build instant credibility with the decision maker by asking relevant, insightful questions. For example, "I know you are currently reorganizing your processes to improve ____. How will this effect your operation in ____?"

4. Reps' temptation to begin selling during discovery. As we began to dive into the customer's world, we hear things that cause us to want to jump right into selling: what the customer cares about, we often hear negative information that could ultimately affect our chances of winning the deal (e.g., likes current supplier, tried your product before and it didn't work, really don't have a need for ____). The natural reaction is to begin defending your position and try your best to change the prospect's mind. Although this is a very natural response, it shuts down discovery.

» Our only hope for ultimately influencing the customer's decisions is to thoroughly complete discovery and gain the necessary information to position your solution in a relevant way. Remember, until you can completely validate their perspective, opinions, concerns, they will never listen to your perspective. Additionally, you greatly enhance the relationship by listening to the customer and creating an environment where the customer is comfortable to reveal honest needs.

5. Reps' inability to truly listen: The typical ISR has a difficult time truly listening to the customer. The opposite of listening is ignoring. Because you are not present when you interact over the phone, the customer is unaware of your facial expressions. They can often feel as if they are talking to dead air or being ignored –

"Hello is anyone there?". Or when they do try to explain their point of view, a typical failing is that your response doesn't demonstrate that you really understand what they are saying. For instance, "That's interesting" Well, if it were interesting, you would have something more interesting to say than that!

» To demonstrate that you sincerely care about the customer and what is important to them, acknowledge not only what the customer is saying, but what is being implied. For example, if the customer says, "This year seems to be going better." Instead of saying "great." Ask, "What happened last year?"

Our only hope for ultimately influencing the customer's decisions is to thoroughly complete discovery and gain the necessary information to position your solution in a relevant way.

BARRIER #6 – Validating Payoff

When field reps have the opportunity to sit across the desk from a decision maker or make a presentation, there are multiple props they utilize to ensure the audience understands, visualizes, and embraces the point. But over the phone, your options are limited.

- » To be effective in inside sales, reps must be able to communicate in a way that ensures the customer emotionally experiences the benefits.

Top ISRs have learned two techniques for building value over the phone and validating the payoff of their recommended solution.

Word Pictures

Often an ISR is faced with addressing a specific challenge or communicating a message that may be difficult for the customer to grasp or comprehend its significance. For example, a customer may be able to find a cheaper solution that appears to have similar value, but is unaware of the consequences for purchasing an inferior product. Or you are faced with explaining a technical benefit that the customer may have difficult grasping. Word pictures or analogies are an effective way to ensure the customer fully understands your point.

- » Word pictures help the customer get emotionally involved and comprehend the weight of your recommendation.

Let me give you an example. Let's say you are competing with a company that offers multiple solutions and you only offer one. You want to demonstrate the importance of being focused. Here's how a word picture can help:

- » "If you take a 100 watt incandescent light bulb, when you turn it on, what does it do? It lights up a small room. The 100 watts of light are scattered about, as designed, and it illuminates a small room. But what if you

Customers need and want to be led, but they will not follow if you are not sure where you are going. Effective ISRs speak with confidence when communicating those key points that are important for the customer to understand.

were to take that same 100 watts of light and concentrate it through a very small hole in a device known as a laser? Now, with the same 100 watts of light, instead of lighting a room, you burn a hole through a metal wall. That is the power of focus." Now you connect your firm's focus on a particular discipline to the power of a laser. The key is creating word pictures for those specific situations where an important concept is difficult for the customer to grasp.

Strong Statements

Another technique to ensure the customer embraces your recommendation and sees the importance of the message is using powerful words or strong statements. Often reps use very weak language to describe a benefit of their solution or the solution provider, and this greatly diminishes the effectiveness of the message.

Face-to-face, the decision maker can see your facial expression, your gesticulations, and your posture. Over the phone, you only have your words. The words you choose will determine if the customer believes you and will follow your leadership.

There are two aspects of strong statements: the first eliminates the competition by using words like "first" and "only". Here, you use words that communicate to the customer that no one in the market place has more, better,

higher quality, etc. In other words, you dominate that category. For example, if you say, "Our customer service is very responsive," it doesn't have near the impact as, "No one in the market responds quicker to a customer issue than we do."

- » Strong statements differentiate your solution as best and unique.

Secondly, strong statements can be used to communicate your expertise and instill confidence in the audience. I recently had the opportunity to sit with a "color sports analyst" for ESPN. He explained that producers always remind guests to use definitive statements when providing opinions about a team or player. Why? The audience doesn't care about anything else.

- » It shows a lack of expertise and confidence if you use weak language.

Customers are no different. When customers are unsure what to do and you use weak language like maybe, could, or probably, it appears that you are just as confused as they are. Customers need and want to be led, but they will not follow if you are not sure where you are going.

- » Effective ISRs speak with confidence when communicating those key points that are important for the customer to understand. They say, "If you do this, this will happen." Leave no room for doubt.

BARRIER #7 – Advancing the Relationship

Since ISRs have made little investment in meeting with a decision maker (i.e., picked up the phone and punched seven digits), they sometimes miss the importance of ending every call with a commitment to a next step.

A sales rep's only resource is time. It is their only currency, and how they invest that currency will ultimately determine their success. Because ISRs don't typically take the time to define the most logical next step with each customer interaction, they not only miss the opportunity to advance that customer relationship, they also end up wasting a lot of time chasing down unqualified prospects which in turn limits the amount of time they have to spend with qualified customers and the downward spiral continues.

Effective ISRs are very intentional about determining the steps that are critical to advancing the relationship and ensuring those steps help distinguish their solution in the marketplace.

Here are some mistakes most often made by junior reps:

» **Beginning the call without determining what they want to happen at the end of the call.** It is critical to think through the possible next steps based on where the decision maker most likely is in their buying process. If you wait to the end of the call to determine next steps, it will probably end with a fuzzy next step like, "Well, just let me know how the meeting went." Or "That sounds great! Why don't I give you a call in a month?"

Top ISRs always assume that they will most likely never connect with the decision maker again, so they know if they can gain a verbal agreement to a defined next step, the chances of keeping the process moving forward increase exponentially.

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» **Choosing the wrong event or next step.**

The events that you want the decision maker to agree to should be based on two factors:

1. What is most helpful for the customer in making a decision (which should always be communicated as the purpose of proposing the next step)?; and,
2. What event or events will ensure that your product or solution will be viewed as best and unique (i.e., give you a competitive advantage)?

Often reps put little thought into the process they want the customer to walk through – a process that will ultimately determine if the customer realizes the benefit of the product/solution and sees it as the best solution.

If you can develop a creative customer development process, it becomes much easier to close business and gain commitment. Your focus shifts from selling a product to selling your process – a much easier sale and an easier commitment for the customer to make.

» **Afraid of creating a "fork in the road."**

In other words, they are so afraid of discovering that the prospect may not be that interested that they avoid asking for a commitment that might expose that truth.

The result: they end the call with zero commitment but feel a lot better – "Okay Bob that sounds great. I will follow up in the next couple of weeks and we can see where things are."

Highly productive reps create a fork in the road. They realize that every time that they are working on a deal, they are losing a deal – and they don't have the luxury of hoping Bob's going to buy.

So they expose reality by asking for a commitment that will either advance the sale or reveal the customer's honest concerns: "Bob, it sounds like you are serious about evaluating this solution. Here's what I recommend as a next step. Allow us to assess your current ____, and then set up a meeting with you and your team to discuss our recommendations. Who do we need to meet with to get that process started? . . . Great, it should take us several days to ____. Can you meet on the 15th to review our recommendations?"

Bob now has to respond to this offer, and regardless of his response you are getting closer to a resolution – either helping Bob, addressing his barriers to moving forward, or moving on to a more qualified buyer. Regardless, it is much better than following up for months to find out you have been wasting your time.

SUMMARY

By overcoming these seven barriers to inside sales success, you and your team will connect more completely with your clients and ultimately increase your overall sales performance.

As you apply the information in this white paper, be aware that becoming skilled at overcoming these barriers is an ongoing process. No matter how successful you are you can improve your game by continuously developing the skills and behaviors highlighted herein.

About ASLAN

Since 1989, many of the world's leading companies choose ASLAN – again and again – as their preferred training resource.

Why such loyalty in such a fickle age? Among the reasons cited is our unmatched ability to bring relevant insight to their unique situations. That's because ASLAN was one of the first sales training organizations to specialize in sales and customer management by phone.

Thanks to this focus, not surprisingly, the changes we effect with our clients become part of their culture for months and years, not days and weeks.

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Founding partner and Chief Executive Officer of ASLAN Training and Development, Tom Stanfill has focused his 17 years of experience exclusively on the creation of training programs for selling and managing customers via the telephone in inside sales and call center environments. He has developed programs for companies such as FedEx, Apple, Aventis Pasteur, Boehringer Ingelheim, Xerox, Deluxe Corporation, American Power Conversion, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Tyco, Computer Associates, Oracle, ScanSource, GE, and Russell Athletic.

Prior to starting ASLAN, Tom founded and ran ES2 – a business-to-business service bureau recognized by Call Center Magazine as the 4th fastest growing service bureau in the country. With the combination of extensive sales and sales management experience and more than a decade focused on developing training programs, Tom is well-positioned as the head of program development and an inside sales subject matter expert.

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Just a few of the clients ASLAN has had the pleasure of helping

