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How “Social Selling” Is Reinventing Cold Calling

Ralf VonSosen (LinkedIn), interviewed by Robert Berkman

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How "Social Selling" Is Reinventing Cold Calling

At LinkedIn, the sales staff has become well-versed in the use of social media tools to open doors for new sales, says Ralf VonSosen, the company's head of marketing for sales solutions.

RALF VONSOSEN (LINKEDIN), INTERVIEWED BY ROBERT BERKMAN

Social media has opened up entirely new ways of communicating with colleagues and strangers as well as with family and friends.

Ralf VonSosen, the head of marketing for sales solutions for the online professional networking company LinkedIn, thinks a lot about using social media, particularly for communicating with sales targets.

VonSosen calls this "social selling" — utilizing the relationships, connections and insights available in social channels to facilitate a better experience in both buying and selling.

"It's really utilizing all this fantastic data that's out there that helps us gain visibility to the connections and relationships we have," says VonSosen. "We can take that data and combine it with the branding and information that we as professionals are sharing, and create a more meaningful experience and conversation." Done right, social selling "moves our contact from a traditional cold call to either a warm introduction or at least a warm conversation," he says.

In a conversation with *MIT Sloan Management Review*'s Robert Berkman, VonSosen talked about free ways to build a personal online brand and about how LinkedIn's Sales Navigator product is being used by both large and small companies.

Let's say there's a company that wants to do more social selling. What are some general strategies you recommend in thinking more strategically?

First, looking at LinkedIn as a tool, I would start with defining your personal and professional brand. You as a professional establish your brand on LinkedIn and think about your LinkedIn page as your personal micro site. You change the mindset of "I have this LinkedIn page for recruiters to look at" to "I have this page for prospects and customers to look at."

It's putting that hat on and saying, "how do I best come across here when customers and prospects are looking at the profile?" You can think about what you want to showcase and how you can show activity and expertise there. You can use a site like SlideShare to upload PowerPoint presentations, Word documents and

Adobe PDF Portfolios, to show some of your talent.

You can then think about sending updates to the people that you're trying to target. I think grounded in all this is knowing who your target market is and then thinking about where they are active. You can find groups to participate in where your target market is. That doesn't cost anything. Find the blogs that your target market is reading and start commenting there. Find out who the people are that you're trying to sell to to follow on Twitter, and start following those people and start creating updates there.

There's a ton of things that you can do without having to spend a dime. It's really just a matter of one, the mindset, and two, making time for it and saying, "okay, I'm going to make it part of how I do business."

LinkedIn's Sales Navigator product was launched in early 2012. This extends the idea of social selling, right? How does it work, and what is its goal?

What we want to do is help sales individuals as well as sales teams actually do social selling at scale.

One of the most important features is TeamLink, which allows users to uncover connections that your colleagues have, even if you're not connected in a first degree connection to those colleagues.

Here's an example. We've got about 1,500 sales reps here at LinkedIn. I'm, obviously, not connected to all of them, yet if one of those connections is looking to sell something to, say, SAP where I've worked before, and they bring somebody up that's connected to me, they will see that connection via TeamLink and can ask me about that.

And even though I don't have a primary first connection to that colleague, I'm willing to help them because we're working at the same company now. It's really putting a net around a private network for the company where everybody can share the information that will benefit the joint goal of the company.

This works when both colleagues are using Sales Navigator and both have a premium subscription. As long as everybody that has a connection has Sales Navigator, they will show up.

That's interesting. What else can Sales Navigator do?

A second element of Sales Navigator is Usage Dashboards. Those are critical not so much for the individual sales reps as much as for the enterprise.

They allow someone to take a look at their sales team and see what kind of activity their sales reps are doing on LinkedIn. So, I can now, for instance, see that my reps are doing so many searches, are sending so many InMails — messages that are sent through LinkedIn from one person on LinkedIn to another — and looking at so many profiles.

I can use that information to create a process and coach people in terms of incorporating social selling into our sales methodologies.

Another feature of Sales Navigator is advanced search filters. These help the sales rep target specifically who they want to find, who they want to sell to and who's active. I can use those filters to get deeper and deeper into who I want in a certain region with this type of experience.

In those filtered search results, they can also see if there's a TeamLink connection with any of those people. So, as they're going through and looking at their search results, TeamLink lets the user say, "hey, those are the ones that I want to prioritize in terms of making contact."

How does a user determine success with Sales Navigator? Can a user measure an actual financial return?

Well, at the end of the day the question is: can I look at my closed deals and do I have some way of assigning where the closed deals came from or [what they] were influenced by?

One of the things that we see a lot of companies look at is conversion metrics, going from initial call to meeting. That's something that's pretty easy to track.

Here at LinkedIn, our sales team also is doing some things where we are actually taking leads that come in and we're assigning those leads based on what we call *social proximity*. As the leads come in from our LinkedIn efforts, we assign them to whoever has a common connection or has the strongest connection with that person. Then we can take a look at what the conversion rates are for those connections.

Can small companies benefit from Sales Navigator?

Well, TeamLink obviously applies to big companies. But we're finding that smaller companies use it for expanding and leveraging their outside network, to use outside introductions to help them get in the door. When sending an email to a target, the credibility of the LinkedIn name as part of one's signature line, can make it a lot easier to get an appointment when you are a small, unknown firm.

The other thing we're seeing is that sales reps in smaller companies are getting more creative in how they utilize their profiles. Profiles can help companies look very official, professional and experienced. They can use company pages within LinkedIn to present their company to their target market.

Do you have any examples of clients that started using these tools and noticed a big bump in productivity?

Well, one story I always tell is just what we saw here in our own sales team. We started seeing a 50% increase in leads to meeting conversion rates.

DocuSign is a company that got to a 90-plus percent utilization rate, and saw increased adoption rates by the sales reps right away when they started using the solution.

Today people respond to LinkedIn InMails because it's a little bit harder to reach somebody that way. If it becomes much easier through Sales Navigator to reach people, do you think there's a danger that people will be less responsive to the InMails?

I think there will always be a premium on the InMails over regular email because it's not a blasting mechanism.

That said, I think that InMail should be almost a last resort for making a new contact, because really it should be all about making that introduction and getting connected with somebody, not about just sending an InMail.

***Robert Berkman** is the contributing editor of* MIT Sloan Management Review*'s Social Business initiative.*

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