

CHAPTER FOUR



Building Your Sales

“A steady stream of loyal customers lessens the need to attract new ones, so you spend less time on marketing and fewer sleepless nights wondering where the next job will come from.”



Generating sales means more than just marketing and advertising. These two areas of business will put your business in front of a lot of potential customers, but there remains the significant job of completing the sale and laying the foundations for repeat custom in the months and years ahead.

A steady stream of loyal customers lessens the need to attract new ones, so you spend less time on marketing and fewer sleepless nights wondering where the next job will come from. It's good for reputation, increases the chances that people will recommend you and provides a solid, dependable platform from which your business can grow.

"We have found that the key to sales is being proficient at customer contact, especially in the early stages. Get back to initial enquiries quickly to show you are keen and interested in the work, produce quality quotes that are clear and explain exactly what is being offered, what is included (don't leave anything out) and follow up, follow up, follow up!"



– Chris Fairbairn, Cribbit Installations Ltd

In this chapter, we'll examine what it takes to make ongoing sales, how you can approach selling in a methodical way and what you can do to ensure customers are left with the contented feeling of knowing they have paid a fair price for a job well done.

SALES STRATEGY

It's possible – perhaps even probable – that you've never considered the idea of a sales strategy before. But as your business grows, creating one will ensure a coordinated approach that delivers the best results. Unless you agree sales goals and a route to hitting these targets, your

approach risks becoming incoherent and patchy, potentially leading to lower revenue and missed opportunities.

A strategy will help you understand your market and will make decisions – such as where to spend on advertising, which jobs to accept and reject and who to hire – a whole lot clearer. Many sole traders wait for calls and decide on the spot whether they will take a job or decline it, which is fine, but isn't sustainable for a business with real potential.

To earn that potential you need to come up with some ideas as to how you'll move forward. A sales strategy should cover:

- **Clear priorities** – where is the low-hanging fruit and how can you grab it?
- **Simple outcomes** – what should happen if you do what you say you will?
- **Guidelines** – how should people act to get where you want to go?
- **Goals** – after doing all the above, where should you be in a year's, or three years', time?

The act of thinking these elements through and writing them down should help you make decisions that will benefit your business in the long term, while driving down the potential for wasted effort or wrong turns.

Your sales strategy is the opportunity to approach business coherently instead of making decisions based on temporary or immediate factors that don't take into account the big picture. It's a bit like the difference between planning a holiday and just jumping in the car with no flights or accommodation booked – and without packing a suitcase.

Breaking down the contents of your sales strategy, you should consider coming up with your ideal contract (being realistic). These are the kind of jobs that will take you to the next level. Think of the factors that will make this transition a reality, by working out the

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strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that make it more or less likely to happen.

A SWOT analysis, as this is labelled, is a standard method of planning used by big businesses of all descriptions. For a multinational corporation, the opportunities and threats are on a global scale – for you they might be more local, but just as relevant to a positive outcome.

First, review the last 12 months and assess what went right, what went wrong and what could have been done to improve what happened. Even if you had a good year, this exercise will give you some insight as to areas of the business that could be fine-tuned.

For example, you could ask:

- How much revenue did you make?
- From how many contracts?
- If you have a team, who was the strongest performer and why?
- What was your best and worst feedback (pick a few examples)?
- What was your best job in terms of benefit to your business?
- Did you improve on the year before – if so, what made the difference?
- Are you in a better or worse place than you were 12 months ago?

Now, think about the next 12 months: are there big events that you can benefit from? Perhaps a new shopping centre is about to be commissioned or a local park is due a revamp. Could you get in early with a pitch? For threats, think of local spending power, your competition, your own competences and staffing – what could get in the way?

You'll start to paint a picture illustrating a clear plan of attack as well as the actions you must take to accentuate the positives and dilute the risks.

Next, think of your sales target. If your revenue is, say, £200,000 a year, what must happen in order for that to grow to £300,000? Your

SWOT analysis coupled with your revenue target will combine to create an action plan, which is where to begin your pursuit of business growth.

Remember the old adage that in business 80% of revenue comes from 20% of customers? It's not as relevant to a small trades business as a large media agency, for example, but it is right in pointing out that some customers will be a lot more valuable than others.

If you already have a team, even if it's just one person, include them in this process. You could start from scratch and work on it as a team, or you could draw up a skeleton plan and ask your people to lend their feedback and ideas to the mix.

If your team is involved in the process they are much more likely to understand the process and your goals, plus (and this is important) they will be more motivated to assist you in making it all happen.



"Quality is key. If you do good quality work then you'll get good recommendations which will improve revenue. You can also use photos of the quality work you've done to advertise on your social media platforms."

– Matt Merry, Matt Merry Roofing

PITCHING AND QUOTING

So, you've assessed your market position, considered improvements to your business and prepared for an upswing in sales. You've upgraded your marketing and advertising so that a stream of future customers know about your brand. Next is the thorny issue of pitching for work, agreeing a price and – ideally – improving your payday with some optional extra services.

Pitching is both a science and an art. You have to make a customer excited (ideally) in your vision for them, but also comfortable with the price you want to charge. The difficulty of getting this balance right is plain to see – even some of the biggest government contractors

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with billions of pounds of revenue occasionally get into hot water because they price too low or overpromise and underdeliver.

Go in too low – perhaps for a high-profile contract – and you risk eating into profit margins or, worse, making a loss. But pitch too high and you might be met with raised eyebrows and a polite ‘thanks but no thanks’.

This is a tightrope walk, admittedly, and it’s very important to factor in all costs. Many of these are obvious, such as parts and labour for the duration of the contract. Others less so, such as wear and tear on equipment (depreciation), fuel and delays, which all must be factored in.

As a customer, it’s always a nasty shock to be presented with an extra bill, regardless whether it is calculated in an itemised list of expenses, so make sure you and your customer understands all costs *before* you get started.

“Generally, we have a daily rate and I work out how many days a job will take and quote from there. We have thought about having a price-matching policy, but I am also conscious of the need to meet wages. Sometimes on a larger job we will give sections out on a price.”



– Chris Jones, LSW Decorating Ltd



SUCCESS STORIES

Name: Chris Jones

Business name: LSW Decorating

Type of business: Decorating and property renovation

Number of employees: 3

How did you get started in your trade?

“When I left school, I attended college and completed an apprenticeship. From there, I have been involved in decorating and property renovation for over 15 years.”

Has the business changed since you started?

“Since starting the business, the main change has been to quickly adapt to enter into the commercial market. We achieved this by becoming VAT-registered, which is more attractive for businesses. We have also branched out to offer other small works such as carpentry. We price for various trades and draw in different contacts.”

Describe your typical customer and project.

“Our typical customers tend to be private homeowners and companies.”

What do you enjoy about your career?

“The thing that I enjoy the most is picking up lots of tips for renovating a property at a reduced cost. For example, recently I was working in a home where a customer had a nice bowl from China as a sink. She mentioned she had a glasscutter create the waste-pipe hole. There are a lot of tips and tricks of this nature that I have picked up over the years.

Living in London, I also enjoy meeting a range of different customers.”

What’s the hardest thing about it, or the biggest challenge you face?

“The hardest thing has probably been running every aspect of the business, such as accounts, IT, quoting, invoicing, and managing projects. I needed to adapt and take certain days off during the month to focus on HMRC submissions. I also have the option to outsource some admin work if needed.”

What are your plans for the future?

“Our plan is to adapt and grow as a company. We plan to become a small construction company involved in purchasing property for renovation.”

What’s your best tip for other tradespeople in your sector?

“I would recommend becoming a limited company, as opposed to being a sole trader. I would also recommend diversifying to branch out into other areas within the industry.”



Accelerate!

When pitching for bigger jobs its important to keep in mind the fundamental principles of profit and loss. Sometimes it's better to refuse a job than to take it on under the wrong terms, especially if it means missing out on another one that's more appropriate.

Your sales strategy gives you a good idea of the jobs that will really boost your business; it's worth making extra effort for these, but not at any cost.

Let's assume there's a juicy contract in the offing, one that will represent a good chunk of your projected annual revenue and that will allow you to invest in further growth. The terms are right and the work is within your scope.

It's likely you'll be up against some stiff competition, so your pitch had better be good. Most customers look for value first and foremost, but many can be persuaded by a grand vision. 'Painting a picture' or 'telling a story' might sound a bit overbaked, particularly if the pitch is for something functional like new locks, a drainage system or insulation, but consider the following: none of the most successful companies sell the nuts and bolts of what they do.

Nike doesn't sell trainers, Apple doesn't sell tech and Airbnb doesn't sell accommodation. They all sell a lifestyle, freedom, fun and experiences.

Big sports brands are all about achieving your fitness goals and emulating superstar athletes; the branding of major banks links what they do with your family, your comfort and your security; technology companies want you to become a better, more efficient person.

Take a leaf (however small) out of their books. You're not selling plumbing, insulation or locks – it's safety, security, convenience and peace of mind. Clients want to know that they can rely on your work and will continue to enjoy its benefits for years to come.

So sprinkle a little magic dust into the pitch to illustrate what they will get, above the physical service you can provide. A compelling pitch adds colour and flavour. It communicates everything that the customer needs to know, plus something extra to engage them.

An important caveat

A common problem with pitches is that they focus on the service provider and not enough on the customer. Describing your abilities is essential, of course, but understanding the customer is equally so.

So do some research, find out the customer's pain-points and make sure you fully understand the parameters of the project, not just your bit of it but the whole thing. What are their priorities? Do they need something quick or will they value constant contact above all? Have they suffered problems in the past?

Make sure the pitch addresses all of the key concerns and include in it some words that show the customer you understand where they are coming from. You don't need to include their complete history, but do include some details that prove you've done your homework.

If you're pitching in person then it's a good idea to take along something visual for the customer to look at. This could be an on-screen presentation, but it could just as easily be handouts, or models or examples of past work.

Providing something tangible will break up the pitch and lengthen attention spans. Clients are more likely to remember pictures than words, too.

It almost goes without saying that pitches should be friendly but professional, informative but to-the-point and, if there is more than one person presenting, then everyone should have rehearsed their role in the pitch to ensure it is fluid and memorable for the right reasons.

After the pitch it might be worth following up with a polite email, thanking the team for hearing your pitch and hoping they found it

valuable. It will help to reinforce their memory of you and underline your keenness to do the work.

UPSELLING

If you win the pitch, there is an opportunity to beef up the job by offering value-added services not included in the original brief. This requires delicacy. In many cases, upselling won't be appropriate because customers are looking for solutions to specific problems. But if you can see room for additional services, and have struck up a good rapport with the customer, then give it go.

Here are a few areas in which you can upsell:

- higher quality products and materials that give better profit margin
- an extended service with ongoing support
- a new aspect to the job, or extra work not mentioned in the pitch
- work on other projects being carried out by the same customer.

If you identify an area in which you can offer something extra, then start a conversation. This approach should be less formal than your original pitch and should start along the lines of: *"We noticed X aspect of the project, did you ever consider doing Y? We could offer you Z."*

It should be framed as an optional upgrade and in no way should it sound like a deal-breaker. If you're unsure how a second approach will be received, it's best to make do with the deal you have worked so hard to win.

It's possible your new customer will want to negotiate terms at this point too, with a view to reducing the price. In this case you need to be firm – don't be tempted to cut your fee unless you can also save money by reducing the scope of the job.

Remember that profit margins and reputation are at stake on every project and that sometimes it's better to walk away than to risk losing money or hard-earned status.

"Sometimes a customer will do the upselling for you. If they are happy with the work but want something to change then be prepared to accommodate them. You'll be paid again so there is no reason to complain.

"I tend to schedule in jobs with a measure of flexibility, which allows me to run over on a job if the customer wants to add something or change what they originally ask for. I wouldn't recommend stacking up jobs because they so often run over for one reason or another. Remember to love the customer you're with!"



– Wayne de Wet, *Wayne de Wet Painting and Decorating Services*

CUSTOMER SERVICE

In business there are two key areas from a customer's point of view: the product or service you provide and the way in which you provide it. The second is often just as important as the first. For online retailers, for example, customer service means easy and quick delivery, ready communication, a simple returns policy and engaging brand messaging.

For a tradesperson it's even more vital, because you're so often in contact with people in their homes and places of work. Many people are uncomfortable around strangers, especially young men, so going the extra mile to put them at ease will win you plaudits.

"We have got where we are today through hard work. No great mystery or lucky break, just hours and hours of input. Anybody with their own business will know there is no such thing as a 40-hour week! In the beginning the business literally consumed our lives, but seven years in, we have established some balance.

"The reputation we built for ourselves generates business for us on a daily basis. That reputation was built with kindness, dedication and respect. Even now, for every customer, for every job, I try to see things from their point of view. I answer questions before customers ask them, I note small things that will make customers' lives easier. We have maintained professionalism and integrity."



– Louise Kirk, *RH Heating and Plumbing Ltd*

Here's a quick list of other ways to deliver first-rate customer service:

1. Be kind, friendly and thoughtful

Manners go a long way in business and people appreciate others who are approachable. But not everyone has a good understanding of the best way to behave around customers. If you're worried, give your team a pep talk.

Pluses and thank-yous should come as standard, as should thoughtful extras such as asking if it's OK to wear your boots in the house, closing exterior doors where possible to keep heat in, and tidying up as much as is reasonable at the end of each day.

Much of this might sound obvious, but does everyone in your team understand how important good manners is – and how not observing them could cost the business?

2. Do the knowledge

Clients often have questions and they might not know who to ask. Make sure your team knows who they are working for, what the main goals of the project are, timescales, locations and any other information that might prove essential.

If someone is asked a question they can't answer, they should promise to find out and have a direct line to someone else in the know.

3. Listen and respond positively

Complex projects like building extensions, bathroom fittings, landscaping and large cleaning contracts don't always go to plan. This is a fact of life and no matter how much you plan, unforeseeable problems and delays can creep in.

If a delay occurs, tell the customer straight away, explain why the problem cropped up and suggest a way to fix it. This will satisfy many people, but sometimes – for whatever reason – a customer will have a gripe to air. Don't argue with them; listen, remain calm and take a moment to respond in a sympathetic way.

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You don't have to admit you're in the wrong if you're not, but getting involved in a shouting match won't help you, the customer, the job or your reputation.

4. Go the extra mile

If it doesn't cost you anything, a five-minute job here and there outside the scope of your brief will boost your standing with your customer. Positive reviews online are full of stories about tradespeople who went out of their way to help.

5. Offer a warranty

You know your work is top quality, but if this is your first job with a customer then they can't be completely sure. Offering a warranty, for example to repair any fair-usage wear for 12 months, will give them added peace of mind.

6. Check back

A project doesn't finish when the last nail is hammered in. It's good practice to follow up after a week or so to ask if your customer is completely satisfied. Invite feedback and, if it's roundly positive, ask if they would be happy to write you a review on Checkatrade.

Circling back to happy customers will cement your reputation and increases the chances you'll be asked back when a new project is up for grabs. Also, people appreciate the gesture because it shows you care.





"Over the last five years my plumbing business has grown stronger and stronger. This is because I take sincere ownership of jobs and provide great service to my customers. Simple things like taking my shoes off in people's houses shows respect and gives potential customers confidence. It wins us lots of jobs.

"The Checkatrade feedback programme has been very influential on my business growth: in this day and age of social media frenzy, word of mouth on its own is not enough to really grow a business."

– Godfrey Muneri, C&G Plumbers Ltd

SUCCESS STORIES

Name: Godfrey Muneri

Business name: C&G Plumbers

Type of business: Plumbing

Number of employees: 4

How did you get started in your trade?

"I was a franchisee owner for four years before, by chance, I watched a programme on TV about the amount of money tradespeople can earn. I got in touch with a plumbing institute, enrolled on a course and then trained to become a plumber."

Has the business changed since you started?

"The first year was quite a challenge. I had to build a portfolio and a customer base, but since then business has grown year on year. In one year my turnover increased by more than 100% compared to the previous one."

Describe your typical customer and project.

“They are usually domestic customers. Jobs include basic repair work, bathroom installations and emergency call-out.”

What do you enjoy about your career?

“The best thing about this job is delivering customer satisfaction and helping people.”

What’s the hardest thing about it, or the biggest challenge you face?

“The hardest thing about the job is the fact that you can’t please everyone.”

What are your plans for the future?

“Ideally I’d like to have more than three vans on the road working for customers in my area.”

What’s your best tip for other tradespeople in your sector?

“It’s true that the customer is always right. You should respect them and their homes.”



