



[HOME::Business/Sales-Teleselling](#)

A Misguided View of Using the Telephone In Sales

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Mark McCormack is CEO of International Management Group, (IMG) the largest sports marketing and sports agency in the world. He invented the industry. If you saw Jerry MacGuire, McCormack's firm is like the big agency Tom Cruise was fired from.

Anyway, Mr. McCormack, author of the book "What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School," among others, also writes a syndicated newspaper column called "Success Secrets" In one of his columns, McCormack talks about the use of the phone as a sales tool.

For about 85% of the article, he's on target, although his view from the corporate tower is a bit clouded by the world he lives in, which isn't reality for most salespeople. Let's examine his points.

"Most salespeople are great in person, not so great on the phone." If we're talking about outside salespeople, I wouldn't be so generous with "most" when using the term "great," although I do agree with the "not so great on the phone." And that's being complimentary.

He then gives reasons. For example, "You can't see the other person . . . You can't ask about that tennis trophy in the corner, admire his fine Zegna suit . . ." We now start to get a feeling that the author might not be in touch with common salespeople. Call me a rube, but I thought Zegna was a goaltender in the NHL.

"People prefer to make, rather than take calls . . . nine times out of 10, you're getting them at a bad time . . . hardly ideal for persuading them to buy something." Right on, sir. The very reason that inside sales pros need to be extraordinarily skilled in order to do well.

"There is no flexibility on time . . . if you play a round of golf . . . you know that you have five hours to say what you have to say . . ." Again, a good point, but one that applies mostly to McCormack's view of the world, one where his sales involve multi-million dollar deals with the likes of Tiger Woods and Nike.

". . . on the phone, the clock is always ticking . . . there's always the fear that the conversation will end at any moment, that the other party will cut you off to take another, more important call." It can and does happen. To outside salespeople, too, who have an "appointment," only to show up and get a two-minute standing interview in the lobby. Real pros, in both cases, ensure this doesn't happen.

"You have to be frontal on the phone." I could almost accuse him of plagiarizing the next points right out of my columns: "If you're calling someone for the first time, you basically

have 60 to 90 seconds to make your case: establish your bona fides, explain the purpose of your call, and hint at the benefit to the party you're calling."

The Point of Contention

After a few more points I nod my head in agreement with ("Despite these objections, the telephone is the greatest business tool at your disposal."), he suddenly steers this train off the tracks and crashes violently:

"In my experience the telephone's greatest strength as a selling tool is to establish your next face-to-face meeting with the prospect." And brace yourself for this one, "You'll never close a complex deal over the phone." Huh? Never? That's probably a shocker to those of you who are doing it.

But that's not all. He continues with, "For that matter, you might not even pique the prospect's interest (OK, I'll give him that one-lot's of unskilled sales reps don't pique interest, but that's because they don't know ho. But brace yourself for the next one as he shoves his wingtip in further.) An in-person meeting ought to be the goal of that first call. If you expect any more, you're not only overestimating the selling power of the telephone, you're also underestimating the power of showing up in person."

No, Mr. McCormack, it seems like you're presuming that all selling is similar to what happens in the stratosphere of your zillion dollar-deal, sports marketing world. "Greetings Bentley, old boy. Biff here. How about I jet down for the afternoon, send a limo over for you, and we'll meet at the club for 18 and martinis afterward. We can nosh around some ideas on that \$20 million shoe contract."

As I've said time and again, face-to-face selling is the most effective way to sell because of the ability to use all of your communicative tools. But being there isn't necessary in most cases, and a waste of time in others. This is truer than outside sales reps care to admit. Outside salespeople could sell more, contact more people, and cut down on wasted time and travel money by using the phone more. The real reason they don't: they're not as confident using the phone as they are being nose-to-nose.

Saying that an in-person meeting should be the goal of that first call, and that expecting anymore is overestimating the power of the telephone . . . well, that's just an irresponsible and out-of-touch statement. Especially from someone whose column is read by far more typical salespeople, inside and outside, than by Jerry MacGuire types.

Get in touch Mr. McCormack. Don't make broad generalizations-which are wrong-that apply to so many people who do the very thing you say can't be done.

Art Sobczak, President of Business By Phone, provides proven ideas, tips, and processes to help salespeople use the phone to prospect, sell and service without morale-killing rejection. To see word-for-word phrases you can use right now to get to and sell more buyers, and other resources such as books, audios, and seminars, and to get his FREE weekly TelE-Sales Tips, and access to back issues, go to: <http://www.BusinessByPhone.com>

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