

DEVELOPING AND CLOSING B2B PRODUCT SALES

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Introduction

This White Paper has been created at the request of a number of our colleagues and new strategic partners. We do sincerely hope it may prove to be of value to all those fighting to increase market share. It's important to note going in that this is not directed towards, nor do we presume to advise firms selling massive technology product or software applications on an enterprise level. SAP, Oracle and others play on a very different field than those of us who have tech products or Windows or Web based software applications that are sold on a unit by unit basis to small to medium sized businesses.

The bad news for those of us who sell products for a few hundred (or a few thousand) dollars a pop is that a single sale doesn't bring in huge amounts of up front revenue or a "buy the Mercedes now" level of recurring service fees. The good news is our type of sale closes quickly...and the small to medium sized business market consists of millions of potential customers as opposed to the much smaller number of large customers who need or can step up for products running into six figures and above.

To quote the nickel a pack chewing gum man, "it's all in the volume, baby!" Well, right...but how exactly do you achieve volume in software or product sales to the small and medium sized business? And how do you keep sales growing? These are the issues addressed here—more than addressed, actually, since this White Paper will offer specific advice and guidelines as to how to develop and close sales of your B2B products.

It's also important to note up front that the advice and guidelines presented here have been developed under one simple premise: do what works. Here at Link It, we've learned not to care about cherished marketing beliefs based on esoteric theories or gut feelings about what should or shouldn't work. Our marketing, lead generation and sales approaches are based on what we've proven through actual testing and use plus a lot of expensive failures trying things that conventional wisdom or MBA studies say should work...but don't.

Link It Software Corporation began life some dozen years ago as a two person operation; myself and my partner, Dr. Gloria McFarland (yes, she's the one with the Ph.D. from Cal Tech and no, I don't fly in that part of the stratosphere. Our partnership works like this: if you need to sell something, I'm the guy to talk with. If you need to create a world class winner of a software app to sell, see Gloria). We started out as a custom software development shop and during the course of our work found a couple of unaddressed needs in the software marketplace (just as you probably found unaddressed needs in your product area). We launched our own Windows products about six years ago, specifically for the business market, and added a Web based application in 2006. Our products retail for \$1,800.00 to \$3,000.00 (see www.linkitsoftware.com). We now have eleven stockholders, a few dozen employees and hockey stick growth; last month alone we were up 70% over last year, and last year was up 35% over the year before that.

Saying this gives me quite a warm and fuzzy...which helps ease the memory a fraction of the terrific and painfully extended beating we took trying to figure out how to bootstrap sales for some great products...and no, in spite of how much we all wish it, great products do not sell themselves. We went through a Thomas Edison period lasting some years; a clone of his thousand plus failures as he tried item after item in his search for a usable light bulb filament.

We tried everything to generate leads, print advertising, direct mail, ranking our Web site, live presentations, canned presentations, printed materials, video materials, trade shows, TV advertising, distributors, resellers, telemarketing; you name it, we tried it. And almost everything failed; usually at great expense and loss of time and salary money, none of which we could afford to lose. Almost everything failed...but some lead generation techniques worked. And then, after tweaking, they really worked, so now all we had to do was close sales from those leads; piece of cake, right? Back to a Thomas Edison re-run. But in the end we got that right too, and now our sales closure rate on leads we generate hovers right around 25%.

I'm going to tell you here where we failed and how we started to win. I'll do my level best to help you avoid the expensive pitfalls we stumbled into and to give you specifics of the techniques we developed not just to cost-effectively generate leads, but to close B2B sales. Everything I am going to discuss and recommend here is the result of our direct experience, experimentation, successes and financial losses from our many failures. My goal is to give you a guide around the potholes, a menu of what we found works and how to implement it. I'm also going to give you the knowledge to help you avoid the lost capital from failed tests you now shouldn't have to run and assist you in capturing the lost revenue from sales you should have closed but lost instead because you didn't have the right techniques in place.

This is the White Paper I wish someone, anyone, had written for me.

Closing Sales

Generating a qualified lead is, of course, the first step in getting a sale. That being said, getting a great lead is like snagging a great fish; it's important to know how to land it before it hits the hook. So first off I'll address the techniques we've found which work to close the maximum number of B2B sales and then we'll move into lead generation and a variety of advertising and distribution methods we've tried which have either worked great or gone down like the Hindenburg.

1. **Response Time To Leads Received.** Getting a call or an E Mail from a potential customer is the flash of a giant "We Want To Buy Your Product" neon sign. It is absolutely astounding to me that many, if not most, B2B companies take a loooooong time to respond to leads...and every minute's delay in calling back a lead drops your chance of closing that lead—by a lot. How much? Try 40%. Yep; the difference in closure rates between calling a lead back within 5 or 10 minutes of your receipt of that lead and calling them the next day...or the day after...is 40%. Call a lead a week after receipt, and your chances of closing that lead have now dropped 70%. Potential customers are pesky creatures; they seem to think folks they might spend money with should be interested in getting their business...and they also tend to call more than one company when they are looking for a specific kind of product. If your sales team wants to remember this point, just have them chant the following two word mantra each morning: snooze, lose, repeat as necessary. We now have a flat statement on our Web site: "We return every call in 5 minutes or less..." and we do it. We have had many customers purchase our software based, in the end, on our response time. Think about it...if your sales people aren't all over the sale, what will your service be like after the sale (that's your potential customer asking that question, by the way)? And speaking of response time, that's not just for phone call leads...that's for E Mails also. When an E Mail lead hits your sales in box, you need to be geared up to have them called back by a real human being within 5 to 10 minutes of receipt. And if that's too much of a pain, either forget about bumping your business 40% overnight or sell out to someone who understands that sales are the gas for that wonderful product you've created.

Moreover, speaking of response time, if you get leads from a trade show be sure your team sends those leads in every day; twice a day would be better. When your office gets those leads, information should go out immediately as in the same day or the next day at the latest. When your trade show lead gets back to their office, you want your information there when they arrive. If you take days or weeks to send information to trade show leads, your time expended in sending material would be better invested at a Sports Bar and if you send information via snail mail, spend the postage money buying a round at the bar instead...at least your expenditure will get you a cheer, which is more than you'll earn from trade show leads if you're not all over them the same day you have them in hand. As a final note on trade show leads, if you are not prepared as well to call every one of them the first day they are back in their office as per the procedures I'll outline here, don't go to the trade show. You'll just be wasting your money, as you won't be closing the leads you generate. Remember the Sports Bar? Think of the party you can throw there with the dough you won't be spending on trade shows.

2. **Formatting Your Product Information, Demos And Delivery Of Materials.** A lead has contacted you and they have been delighted and amazed by your response time. Now they want information and a product demo. What you send them and how you send it may be a bit of a challenge to your (if you have one) "here's how it has to be done 'cause this is what the client expects" procedures; it certainly was to ours. There's lots of good news here, though, because what I'm going to advise you to do will not only save you money but is more effective in closing sales and closing them more quickly. We have a saying internally here, one which I cheerfully stole from a great ad agency which is no more (they were bought out) to wit: Know Your Mouse. In sum, this means you can't bait the trap unless you know what your client mouse really wants...not what they say they want or worse, what you assume they want.
 - A. Ignore all Luddite requests for printed materials and/or brochures (yes, we still get those too). Everything should be sent via E Mail and attachments to same. Most of you reading this are probably already doing this, but when? If you want to close business, background on your company and your products should be sent immediately upon hanging up with a new lead, or upon leaving them a voice mail. If someone insists on snail mail and the expense (yours of course) of creating printed materials, my advice is to forget them...they're not seriously in the market (our customer base has a lot of small companies in it, plus firms like Sony, Disney, Sumitomo, ADM, G.E. and numerous others. Everyone, including the Big Boys And Girls got our information electronically...and we got the business). Be sure and include a summary sheet of features so the person researching the purchase can print it out for fast review by whomever has to approve the recommended purchase, which if you do this right, will be your product.
 - B. Attach a bid and a purchase agreement for them to sign (and the credit card info form); hopefully all in one document (and keep it short; all on one page if humanly possible). Yes, that's right, send a bid and purchase agreement with the first load of information you send to a potential client. Your sales will immediately go up; potential clients hate not being able to have an immediate quote...and getting pricing from your competitors is usually like extracting a molar. You, in contrast, need to be easy and up front. Ever notice how many software and tech product sales Web sites do not include pricing? That's because their philosophy is to try to be coy about costs to get a potential client to call so they can hammer away at them. Customers hate this approach. If you are part of that unruly mob, leave and create a team clients love to work with. If your pricing is not on your Web page, put it there. If your product involves modules and various service contracts, figure out a way to make things simple and quotable from the outset.

Even if the quote is wrong and the client needs to have you revise it as his needs become more clear, potential clients will love you for sending them something to give their boss an idea of pricing. Yep, this may be a lot of work, but there's a big payoff in increased sales. If it's too much work, hey—there's always that Sports Bar.

- C. Almost everyone will ask for a working product demo; i.e., some kind of actual working version of your software with a drop dead date on it so they can “click around” and “see if it works for them,” or a live demo of your tech product. I'm not making fun of this by any means; anyone spending money for a software or hardware product wants to make sure it works and “hands on” would seem to be the only way to determine this. Short story: when we first started shipping our Windows software products, we created drop dead in 30 days, working demo CDs to send to clients...that's how software sales is done; everyone knows that. So we did it...and a short time later I noticed something: we were spending thousands of dollars a month on tech support for products we hadn't sold yet. Sure we included our manual on the demo CD, but when you're a potential buyer, it's a whale of a lot easier to pick up the phone and ask how to do something than it is to read a manual; more fun too. And when a potential customer calls and starts asking a lot of questions as they fiddle with your product, what are you going to do...say “no we won't help you” and blow a potential sale? As I glumly watched our working capital hemorrhage into the black hole of unpaid tech support, as luck would have it I met with a friend of mine who was in the market for software (not our type of product, darn it). He quit banging his head against the wall long enough to show me a half dozen working demos he'd been provided from as many companies, each of which would require multiple hours to learn in order to figure out which product had the features he really needed. It suddenly hit me...my friend, and probably everyone else out there buying software or tech products, except for a few hard core geeks, didn't want to expend hours and hours to figure out what product to buy. Rather, they just wanted a quick and easy way to see what the features were of a particular product and how the product actually worked in practice. And if they could eat a sandwich while doing so, so much the better. Later that night, on a commercial break I forgot to Tivo, the Video Professor, that dude who sells training video CDs for Windows apps, started hawking his products...and dawned the light. We purchased a program called Camtasia and recorded a narrated, indexed video CD in house showing every feature of our software in actual operation...and bagged the working “expire in 30 days” customer demo of our software. As soon as the video was completed we started sending it out. Our tech support for unsold software dropped to just about zero...and our sales actually increased. We also set up a GoToMeeting live demo procedure to have one of our sales people give a live demo of our software to clients who wanted have a meeting in which they could ask questions about the software and so forth. For the very few (well under 5%) of our potential customers who insisted on actually using our software before they purchased, we set up a server and let them use a working version of our applications on line (and guess what: most of those we set up to use our software on line, never log in yet they end up buying our software anyway. Just goes to show you). The moral of this story is: don't send out working demos of your software and don't give out your product for “hands on” use. Create a video CD in house (keeps it cheap) of all the features and send that out instead; you'll save a bunch of money and headaches and your sales will benefit. Another big tip which will close even more sales for you: in addition to the full length, in depth video of your product, create a short (no more than 5 minute) overview of your product which hits the main features.

Although they won't admit it, that's what most folks who ask for a demo will really look at, and that's what they will show the boss (if you start spending too much money sending out video CDs, check this out: <http://www.linkitsoftware.com/infocenter/InfocenterMain.html>. We don't even send out CDs anymore; the video is streaming on the Web and other information is downloadable).

Under the heading of Know Your Mouse, remember: everyone is really busy. We may think all anyone should want to do is spend hours reviewing the wonder of our products. But in reality, all your potential customers want to do figure out as fast as possible "what does the product do" and "what does it cost?" And they want something short and succinct to show the boss (Hey! I've done my job; I finished this pain in the buttski research you dropped on me and here's my recommendation! Now, can I please get back to what I REALLY do?). The more painless, quick and easy you can make this process, the more sales you will close...and your customer will be grateful for your process.

D. I'll be addressing the value of Web site ranking and how to achieve high rankings in a bit, but in terms of sales remember your Web site should be another quick and easy to use repository of information, pricing, and ordering. Your phone number, contact us information, lead capture, pricing and the ability to order on line must all be in place. In addition, of course, any potential client should be able to access all the information on your products through your site. We have worked very hard on our sales site, tweaking it over and over until we think we have maxed out the response (and orders) we can get from client hits. Detailing what we did would be a White Paper in and of itself, but please do feel free to go to www.linkitsoftware.com and check things out. I would suggest looking at what we did with the videos as well as the write ups covering our products. I would very much recommend you review our lead (contact us) form and particularly our order form. It will drive my sales people crazy, but you might even try to place a bogus order (please make sure it is obviously bogus) and see how our credit card and bank wire forms work. Again the bottom line is to make things as obvious and easy for a buyer as is possible.

3. Ongoing Lead Follow Up. This area is just as critical as immediate response to leads of all kinds. The follow up procedure to leads received is the second half of the sale. Without engaging in the type of follow up I'm about to describe, you will lose all of the momentum your team will generate from immediate response to leads.

- A. When a lead contacts your company, as soon as the sales person is finished talking with the customer (or has left a message for the customer) an E Mail needs to go out under the sales person's name providing an overview of the product, all contact information, pricing (and a bid if the customer has been spoken with in person).
- B. Before I get into the timing of the next round of follow-ups, I need to address one of the greatest failings of marketers and sales people: doing a one sided telepathic merge with a customer's brain; A.K.A. The Lonely Vulcan Solo Mind Meld. It's done like this: (Sales Person, internal dialogue, E Mail Version) "Lemme see...I just sent an E Mail, and the client will probably not read it until tomorrow. Or the next day. Then they'll have to show it to other people, consult their dog, check the alignment of Venus and walk Widdershins. So I better not call them until next Monday, or they'll think I'm bugging them."

Alternate internal dialogue, Phone Call Version: “Ah...I just called and left a message, so I certainly can’t call back later today or the customer will get mad. And I probably should wait and see if they call me back tomorrow as a matter of courtesy, so if I don’t hear I’ll call in a couple of days or three ‘cause I certainly don’t want to make them mad or have them think I’m pushing for their order or anything.” Those are the musing of failure, blown sales, and mad investors (yours).

- C. After much experimentation, we have developed a follow up system which yields the maximum of sales. Believe me we’ve tried every approach starting with the Mind Meld and building from there. Here’s the winning strategy:
1. When your sales person sends the initial E Mail with all product information following up on the first client contact via phone or by leaving a voice mail, they need to immediately call back and leave word the information has been sent and “please let me know if you didn’t get it.”
 2. If your potential customer can access your product information via Web site videos, as is the case with us, they should then be called the next day after sending the initial E Mail and asked if they have had time to review the information, “can we ship you our product today?” and etc.
 3. If you send out a product demo CD (do a video!), the customer should be called the day you think they received the video not after the X days you think it will take them to review the demo. This call, at the least, can be used to get a hard date to call back from the customer; you need to have them tell you when they’ll be ready, not pick a date through the telepathic process I described earlier. This continues to give your company the air of being on it...and if you’re on it for the sale, one can only assume you’ll be on it for customer service after the sale.
 4. When a potential customer is reached they will often ask for a call back in a week (or two or a month etc.). Unless a “hard” time as been set, such as 3:00 PM on the 15th, if the customer says “call me in a week,” call them in 4 days. If the request is for two weeks, call in a week and a half, a month, call in three weeks. Time is your best friend and worst enemy when it comes to closing leads: it’s your best friend when you call someone back right away and your worst enemy when you wait for whatever reason to re-communicate with someone. The more time that passes, the less chance you have of closing the lead no matter how hot it was to start with.
 5. If a sales person can’t reach a lead either initially or after they’ve spoken with the lead and sent information, the sales person needs to call back every day for at least a week; and if they don’t have many leads to call, for two weeks—every day!.
 6. After every call when a lead is not reached and a voice message left, the sales person immediately needs to send out an E Mail (“Jim/Mary! Sorry I missed you today!”). The sales person should create 10 canned E Mails to use, each a little different, so they can send them out with a click or two. The E Mails must be personalized.

7. If the chase proves fruitless; i.e. a week or two of calls have been placed with no connection or call back, the lead must be placed on a weekly E Mail follow up. Sales should create 10-12 canned follow up E Mails which can be used in rotation, the content of which should be cheery (“just wanted to check in and see...”) coupled with a short summary of your product (it’s important they remember what you’re selling, right?).

You will get sales out of this follow up list, just as we do. If you don’t do this, you will blow 3% to 5% of your yearly sales...run the numbers and see what the yearly earnings of 5% of your total sales would be from a series of once a week, automated E Mails; it will cheer you up. Also, you can shake sales loose from your follow up list by running specials at various times of the year. Oh yes...keep sending the follow up E Mails until the prospect buys, tells you to stop or the E Mails start to bounce.

8. Final comments on sales follow up procedures: Your leads contacted you because they want to do business. They are businesses; they too have to sell product so you are not going to “offend” them by pushing for a sale; after all, your product is the best there is and they need to have the best. That’s you again. Most companies like to work with a friendly but aggressive firm that believes in their product; i.e., you. Once in a great while we get chided for pushing so hard. Our response: “We want your business!” Ask for the sale, ask for the sale, ask for the sale.

Lead Generation. What Didn’t Work For Us.

As my partner often points out, you learn as much (and sometimes more) from failures as from successes. Since Successes are much more fun, we’ll deal with those last to end on an up note. In no particular order then, here’s what we have tried which did not work.

1. Print advertising. We tried a lot of it, particularly in specialty magazines which catered, in theory, to the customer profile which would be interested in purchasing our products. When we got response at all, which was pretty seldom, 99.9% of it turned out to be from tire kickers who were just fooling around and had no real intention of buying anything. There are reasons print specialty publications are losing so much ground to electronic media; falling circulation and lack of response to advertising being right at the top of the list.
2. Direct mail. A complete waste of money. Response to direct mail keeps falling for anything other than consumer products. Unfortunately, I had to find that out for myself in spite of being advised to the contrary. Trust me on this one; don’t waste your money on direct mail.
3. Pay Per Click Advertising. Do this **ONLY** with the major search engines (Google, Yahoo and MSN) and **ONLY** until you rank in the top ten on the search engines; then bag the pay per click campaign totally. Don’t listen to the pay per click folks who say that even though you rank highly in organic searches, you should also do pay per click advertising, as it will increase your lead flow. They lie. If you want to invest money in Google, Yahoo, or MSN buy stock in the company; don’t squander your dough on pay per click advertising once you’re ranked. True, your ad dollars will increase their stock value...but you won’t share in it ‘cause you’ve spent all your money on useless pay per click ads.

There are also a lot of companies out there that say they will generate “leads” which are in actuality clicks on some web site ad, banner ad, or promotional pitch of some sort. These type of programs are a total waste of money and resources; we’ve never found one that actually produces quality leads, and not for lack of trying on our part.

4. Banner ads and various on-line advertising schemes. Don’t do it. Invest your money in getting your rankings up into the top ten on the big three search engines.
5. E Mail lead generation companies (and E Mail list “update” firms). Run the other way. We’ve tried three of them, supposedly the best in the business. Two only delivered 60% of their contracted leads (which had a closure rate of less than half of our own leads) and the third delivered zero and now won’t respond to us at all (after giving us great references and getting a deposit). This is a flaky business area. Don’t touch it and don’t even THINK of hiring someone to do E Mail marketing for you. Think Spam. Think Blacklist By Google.
6. Companies that will list you on dozens or hundreds of search engines. See the last six words in point #5 above.
7. Television and radio advertising. Unless you have a very broadly based niche product (such as QuickBooks), your odds of this working are quite small and testing is very expensive. We produce a maintenance software product, which can be used by a wide range of companies, and our tests in a couple of major markets showed us that using radio or TV advertising just didn’t pencil out in the short term...and it’s in the short term you have to make payroll. Long term and a multi-million dollar investment? Perhaps, but you can develop sales faster and much more cheaply by using other approaches.
8. Offshore Telemarketing. Telemarketing/call centers work great...but not located off shore. I’ll be addressing how to make telemarketing work in the next section, but suffice it to say that if you hire an off shore telemarketing group to sell your products, no matter how reputable they may be, you will fail. Expensively.
9. Trade Shows. This falls under the heading of “probably will fail.” Trade shows seem to make so much sense in theory, but in practice, with a few exceptions I will admit, it is extremely difficult to sell software or tech products at a trade show or from trade show leads (attendees will kick every tire in sight, but their interest is usually fueled by visits to the beer concession stand). If you cater to a specific market niche and you want to build product awareness without making immediate sales, then some trade shows may be O.K. for you...but do have some dollars to burn on long term image development. Here we are interested in just one thing: sales right now today. If that is your orientation as well, there are usually better places to put your marketing dollars than in trade show expenditures. There’s plenty of time to go to trade shows when your company is wealthy enough to be concerned about warm and happy brand image development rather than day to day sales volume.
10. Distributors and resellers. I have put this under “Things That Didn’t Work,” but our results were kind of a mixed bag. Since we spent a lot of up front money for very little immediate result here but have some long term potential (remember payrolls have to be paid in the short term), it would seem to make sense to address this here. A couple of years ago, we were signed up by one of the top three software and hardware distributors in the world. They in turn have hundreds of resellers who take orders from corporate clients and get product from the distributor. Hot damn! Order the yacht, Mama, we’re good to go! Well...not exactly.

After flying around the country visiting multiple distributor and reseller offices, training reps on our products and spending money like a drunken Donald Trump, we noticed something: major distributors and resellers are not set up to introduce new products. What they do, and do very well, is take and fill orders from end users. If your product is not of a type that end user customers already know and need (cables, printer ink, etc.), or if you are not branded (Microsoft, Hewlett Packard), a distributor and their reseller chain will sell very little for you, and absolutely don't count on them to introduce or pitch your products to end users...A) they are too busy taking orders and B) they don't want expend the time to learn about your products (see point A).

I really can't blame them for this, but if you get involved in a distributor/reseller chain don't have any illusions about them selling your product—they'll take orders for it, but they won't sell it. You also should know that major distributors and resellers have many, many programs in place set up to charge vendors—you in other words—thousands of dollars a pop to come in and "train" their sales people to sell your products. Many distributors and resellers, in fact, have whole profit centers which do nothing but extract dollars from vendors—you again—for the privilege of training distributor and reseller salespeople to sell your products...which they won't do unless you are, as I say, branded or selling a product the buyer already knows.

It is important to note here that long term, we probably will break even on the distributor/reseller expense beating we took, as we got cleared by them to sell to the government and our travels to their offices and meetings with their marketing people gave us the key to breaking our own marketing loose, which I'll get in to shortly. But again, if you get approached by a major distributor or are trying to get involved with one, it's a bruising experience if you are expecting (as we were) to sign the agreement and suddenly get flooded with orders. Instead, you will find yourself flooded with requests from the distributor and their reseller chain to pony up thousands and thousands of dollars for the privilege of training distributor/reseller sales teams...all of whom pretty much forget about you and your product the moment you leave the seminar. Alice, the White Rabbit, and distributor chains; true alternate realities. It is also important to note here that an exception to all this is the manufactures' rep area. If your product's end user is part of the business world where they are visited directly by manufacturer's reps, that's where you should be. A manufacturer's rep meets directly with your end user buyer and can present the concept of your product directly and see if there is an interest. However, don't expect any manufacturer's rep to learn and sell your product as it ain't going to happen; reps handle many products and your product is complicated. Their job will be to find out if there is an interest on the part of the buyer in your type of application, and if so to turn the lead over to you. In short, as you build your company if sales are going to be closed, it's up to you. There's no magic bullet until and unless you and your product become a household name...assuming, of course, households are your market, which they probably are not.

Lead Generation. What Works For Us.

After all the struggle, expense, frustration and head banging, it always amazes me that our lead generation boils down to just a few approaches.

1. **Rank your Web site.** Yeah, I know: well, duh! But as you've probably found out, this is a lot easier said than done. Let's start with a few words of caution: there is no quick way to do this. There is no cheap software, magic bullet or bucket of pixie dust that going to get this job done.

Be VERY careful not to get involved with any of the “we’ll send out your Web site for ranking to hundreds of search engines” scams; they can get you blacklisted. If Google in particular blacklists you, you can have as much as a year to wait to even be allowed to get back on the radar screen, probably in a position right below a listing for the “How To Become A Terrorist Handbook.” Unless you are a hardcore search engine geek, you’ll need professional help from a reputable team (check a LOT of references) which specializes in SEO (Search Engine Optimization). Regardless of what you may read on the “We’ll Get You Ranked At Number One” spam you receive, there’s only one way to achieve high rankings on the search engines: your site has to be set up and optimized for the algorithms (rules) of the search engines...which they don’t publish, of course.

This takes a team of specialists who study the search engines and understand that trying to be tricky or get around the rules with some sort of scheme is the way to get blacklisted.

Finding a good SEO company can be a bit tricky, particularly finding one that will do the job without charging you many tens of thousands of dollars. A place to start is to search on Google for SEO and SEO companies...after all, if an SEO company can’t rank themselves in the top ten, how are they going to succeed for you? You should expect to pay an initial fee to have your site optimized and then a monthly fee for ongoing maintenance. How much? Well, it’s been a while since we put our contract in place, but an initial hit of five to seven thousand is probably about right with ongoing fees running in the two to four thousand dollar area. Assuming the company you hire knows what they are doing, it will also take a few months for your site to start ranking in the top ten of search results for your major key words, so be prepared for some up front blood flow (the reason it takes a bit of time for your rankings to improve is that the search engines, Google in particular, update their rankings periodically, and no one knows when they are going to spider the Web and review ranking returns. If your site gets optimized and you hit the next update right away, things may move fairly fast. If you hit the cycle where the next update is three or four months off, well there you go). After two or three false starts (each one causing months of delay and loss of fees) we found a great SEO company called Linkateer run by a search engine fanatic and all round great guy by the name of Frank Travasino. After a few months of work together, Frank and his company orchestrated our being ranked between #1 and #3 for all our primary key words on all the major search engines and our rankings have stuck like glue for over three years. If you are on the hunt for an honest, fairly priced, knowledgeable firm to blast you up to #1 in the rankings, here’s a way to save yourself a lot of risk with an unknown SEO firm: call Frank (610) 906-3579 and no I don’t own any stock in his company. Take it from me, the benefits of being ranked in the top ten of search results on the major search engines are huge, right where it counts: sales. Ranking your site should be an absolute top marketing priority for your company.

- 2. Telemarketing.** We failed at this four times in a row and now it is a huge lead source for us (the problem with marketing is that it’s sometimes difficult to tell if you’re being brilliantly stubborn until a process has time to work, or stupidly fixated on an approach which is the definition of insanity; i.e., doing something over and over which-will-not-work). At the outset, we worked really hard to make the telemarketing process work. To maximize our budget, we researched the best telemarketing companies in both India and the Philippines (proven track record, great references, educated English speakers etc.) and worked with the companies we hired day after day to try and refine the process and get it to produce good leads. It was like trying to tie up a bunch of marbles with a piece of string; we just could not get off shore telemarketing to work. The groups would generate a lot of “leads,” but those “leads” turned out to be non-lead leads; i.e., our sales team would be all over them only to find that the people really weren’t interested after all. Four times back to back with four different off shore companies we failed miserably; virtually every dollar we invested was wasted.

In despair, I dropped the idea...but it just wouldn't leave me alone...doggone it, it should work. We had a great product; we were getting a lot of leads and sales from our Web site, we have a huge potential market base and we know who they are; why won't calling our potential customers directly work? We found the key during our ill-fated adventure with the distributor/reseller chain. As we traveled from office to office pitching our products to distributor and reseller sales teams, I noticed something: not a one of them had an office open to customers for the purchase of product, but everyone one of them had in house call centers with hundreds of callers selling many, many millions of dollars worth of software and hardware product (our distributor did seven billion dollars last year, and many of their resellers do hundreds of millions of dollars yearly—all with call centers).

It became abundantly clear that the problem was not the telemarketing/call center concept, the problem was that call centers had to be in house and US based. So we set up a call center in our South Dakota offices where we handle our sales, tech support and customer service (our headquarters is just north of Los Angeles).

The rest, as they say, is history. After we put a call center team in place, it took us five more months of salary investment and work to get it right. We went through seven revisions of our "first call" approach (what we said, who we asked for, offers we made, following up, when to transfer a lead to a sales person, and much more) and four revisions of our follow up call approach. But in the end, we nailed it. As we went through the process, it became clear that if we had not had the team in house, been able to work with the callers hour by hour to gauge customer response and to get ongoing feed back daily from our sales team as to lead quality, we would have failed again. It also became crystal clear as to why our off shore teams had failed: selling software and technology products is not like selling a new credit card or a magazine subscription. There's a lot more to it in terms of approach and the effort must be refined in tandem with the sales team.

A team of seven callers in our call center can now produce 50 real leads a week for us. And the equally terrific news is that the process we've refined into scripts and procedures for initial calls, follow up and lead qualification works for any sophisticated B2B product; the callers do not have to understand the minute details of the product itself. This means the call center effort is scalable; just add more team members, train them on the script format and procedures we've worked out and turn them loose to generate leads.

We have received requests to have our call center develop leads for B2B products other than software, as well as for software products different from our own. After some considerable discussion in house, we have decided that while we need to focus on what we do (our software sales), we should listen to the market and make any excess capacity we may have in our call center available to our strategic partners and outside companies who sell products B2B. My offer of the day is that if you sell B2B and you need leads or have wanted to test telemarketing for your product, we will open up our center to you for a test.

- 3. Press Releases.** This should be a must for your firm. We have found press releases to be a powerful tool to generate sales, and pretty immediate sales at that. Just remember as you engage in this that any release you put out there has to have substance; i.e., it has to involve a real announcement of, say, new features, new partnerships, and so forth. If you send out a release and it is just fluff, it won't get published, which is the whole point of going to the work and expense. You also should do yourself a favor and work with a reputable firm which can both distribute your release to a wide base and advise you on format and content.

If you are looking for such a company, try eReleases, (800) 710-5535, <http://www.ereleases.com>. Ask for Heather Fuller. Short aside: an example of the power of a press release as opposed to a print ad is an experience we had when one of our press releases was published in a trade publication which is the bible of its industry. We took a bunch of orders when the release hit the publication. We were so impressed that after waiting for a time, we took out a big ad in the publication figuring that the press release proved the publication could deliver customers. Happily we wrote a check for three grand, or as Tony Soprano puts it, three large. Nothing. Not a single order. Nary a phone call. This experience, and subsequently a few others, demonstrated that a publication's readers trust a faux-news story...and tend to dismiss an ad.

4. **Strategic Partnerships.** I'm embarrassed to say we came to this party later than we should have, but the band is playing and I recommend very strongly you adopt this strategy for your marketing...with my usual caveats, of course. By and large, we have found that alliances which involved simply putting links on each other's Web sites, putting out partnership announcements in newsletters and so forth are nice but don't really do much. The winning strategy here is to partner up with other companies who sell software or a tech product to a customer base which is the same one to which you sell your (different) software or tech product. As part of your alliance, you need to allow them to contact your customers (E Mail, fax, phone calls etc.) as your partner and you need to be allowed to do the same with theirs. The key here, so existent customers don't feel their info has been sold or moved to a third party, is to inform any customers contacted that you are a partner of the company they bought product from originally, and through the partnership they, the customer, can get another valuable software program or product at a special price. We have never had a problem with this approach. Strategic partnerships are so valuable for both parties since, if handled right, each partner can leverage the other's customer base into new sales. And best of all, existent customers are already buyers and are open to buying other items from the partner of a company they trust. This approach is a great way to generate really qualified lists to contact for new sales.

As the old saw goes, the devil is in the details and there are a lot of details involved to successfully implement what I've described here. But trust me on this one: if you use what contained here you'll really boost your sales and avoid a lot of losses. As has probably become apparent, we believe that sales have to be a, if not the major focus of any software or tech company. Sure, you have to have a great product, but I am assuming you have that and have your head screwed on properly in terms of product updates and meeting the needs of the marketplace. If so, then note and be very afraid: the B2B world is littered with the bleached bones of companies which had truly great products...and couldn't sell them. If you have questions or if I can help in any way, E Mail me at wayne@linkitsoftware.com or give me a holler at (818) 574-3970 Ext. 103. And as a friend of mine is wont to say, Hey! See ya around the jungle!

About The Author

Wayne D. McFarland, currently CEO of Link It Software Corporation, began his career in a Hemmingway fit as a journalist wandering around the US, Europe and Trinidad. Recovering, he founded a company which developed major presentations and trade shows for firms such as Harley Davidson and McDonald Douglas. This eventually resulted in Star Wars inspired shows at major venues including Radio City Music Hall and the Grand Ol' Opry finishing with the creation of a presentation opening a nationally broadcast country music awards festival and the 50 year anniversary of the Hollywood Sign. Broadcasting reared its head, and he moved on to developing major contracts to provide game show advertising products to major media outlets.

During this time he co-owned a company with the Beach Boys designed to provide major entertainment to airlines and hotel groups which then provided services to the entertainers. He then began being hired to turn around failing broadcast stations by leveraging their ad time and increasing sales. In order to do this, systems had to be installed which lead to computer programs. This in turn lead to the establishment 12 years ago of Link It Software with his partner in business and for 33 years of life, Dr. Gloria McFarland, the designer of the products Link It sells to the world. Wayne lives happily in California with Gloria, two dogs and one cat. He probably works too much bouncing around between Link It's L.A. and South Dakota offices but does indulge in stress relief by regular "spoil the kid" visits with Gloria to a variety of nieces and nephews.