

The Road to “Pendingville” is Paved with Good Intentions By Mark Dembo and Thomas J. Baskind

If you've been in sales for any length of time, or have participated in a sales training program, chances are you've been taught to look for “buying signals” from your prospects. Buying signals can be important; but they can also easily be misinterpreted. I recently read an article in which the author equates certain statements or requests from your prospect with indication they are ready to buy. For example:

- Your prospect repeats a question that has been answered fully.
- Your prospect asks for a sample
- Your prospect makes “positive noises.”
- Your prospect makes “any comment or question about price”
- Your prospect asks for references.
- Your prospect asks for your guidance or opinion.
- Your prospect mentions a negative experience with a previous supplier.

Are these buying signals? Maybe. Maybe not. They could simply be questions that serve to clarify or gain an understanding of what you can do for them. Certainly, queries or comments like those listed above indicate that your prospect is at least “playing ball” with you – that they are engaged in an active sales process, and have some level of interest.

If we take these buying signals as gospel, we run a real danger of driving ourselves down a road of false hope toward the land of “Pendingville.” Ever been there? In a meeting, the prospect shows some of these positive signs and you walk out of the meeting feeling like you've got the sale in the bag. You follow-up by sending the information the prospect requested, you provide samples, you provide references, you give them a full-blown white paper offering guidance and advice. And then you call them – presumably to close the deal, and your call goes unanswered. You call again. You e-mail. You stop by their office. You send them cute and funny notes. You pray.

In the meantime, your manager asks you how it's going with the prospect. You tell her, “Looks great, just waiting for the green light to get started.” Week after week, it's the same story. If you have enough of these prospects in your pipeline, you're looking forward to next month when you're sure all of these wonderful people will get back to you with that huge order. And, since you know you will have this huge influx of new business you figure there's no reason to do any new prospecting because you're going to be so busy with these new accounts you won't even have time to handle more.

The next month comes, and nothing happens. Then you start to panic; your boss is wondering what happened to all those huge deals. That Hawaiian vacation you were already planning in your mind vanishes from view. You realize you'd better get busy and get some new things going. And again, the cycle is repeated.

What was missing in this process? The NOT-buying signals. Spending too much time with prospects that either aren't going to buy or aren't ready to buy is one of the biggest mistakes that salespeople make – even veterans. By nature, all of us in sales are optimists – we want to believe that everyone who tells us they're interested is in fact going to buy from us.

To protect ourselves and our income, though, we need to take a step back and sometimes play the cynic. Here are some of the things you should be looking for that could be indicators it's time to move on:

- Will the prospect agree to a firm next step with you? (For more on this topic see ["The Art and Skill of the Next Step."](#)) If not, it may be time to move on.
- Have repeated calls to a seemingly "hot prospect" gone unreturned?
- When you speak to the prospect do you hear something like "I really like your proposal, but I need to do (fill in the blank) to get it moving forward"?
- Another variation of the above: "We really want to move forward, we just need a bit more time", or "We really want to move forward, but we've had some other priorities come up."

I don't want to be a naysayer, but typically these are signs that the sale is not going to happen; at least not within our normal sales cycle. There could be legitimate reasons as to why the prospect can't move forward that are beyond your control. So what do you do?

First thing to do is to be on the lookout for anything that sounds like a "not-buying" signal. You want to hear those as early in the sales process as you can so you can spend your time with leads and prospects who are more likely buy within your normal cycle.

Next, if you're not sure what the real reason might be for not moving forward, ask a question such as "Did we do something wrong?" (That's also an effective message to leave for someone not returning your calls.) You may be able to get some valuable information that can help you recraft a recommendation, or give you more solid footing on which to move forward.

Finally, always make sure that you have enough coming into your sales pipeline; know how many new appointments you need at any given time in order to achieve your numbers. Don't allow yourself to get caught in "Pendingville" without a reliable map and escape plan.

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