



How To Get Past The Gatekeeper

How To Get Past The Gatekeeper – And Through to the Decision Maker

Hello and welcome to another MTD Sales Training tip. Today we're going to be discussing how you can get past those dreaded gatekeepers and through to the decision maker.

Let's start with me asking you a quick question:

"In business-to-business sales, what's the first sale that you must make? What's the first sale that you have to close?"

Now you might have said setting up the appointment but actually, that's the second sale. The very first sale you have to make is to sell the gatekeeper on letting you through!

Now here's another thought: As a professional sales person, you try to find out all there is to know about your prospective customers. You search their web site, you study their habits, you examine all of the demographics and you investigate the company and their current suppliers.

You do everything possible to prepare to approach your prospect. However, remember the first sale that you must make, the first prospect you must face, is the gatekeeper.

How much do you know about the gatekeeper? And how much time do you spend in improving your skills on how to get through them?

You see, the main reason that sales people have so many problems with gatekeepers is that they know nothing about them. So, before we get into some very effective ways to get pass the gatekeeper screen, let's spend a few minutes and take a closer look at exactly **who** these people are---let's get to know this first and most important prospect---the gatekeeper.

The Modern Day Gatekeeper

The first thing you must realise is that today's modern gatekeeper is nothing like those of the past. This gatekeeper, that secretary, receptionist or other frontline person, who stands between you and the decision-maker has evolved.

Now if you view the gatekeeper as some low-level pawn that's there to do nothing more than annoy you and make your life a misery, then you're sadly mistaken. Today's gatekeepers are an educated, well trained, sophisticated and sales savvy professional that has more power and influence than you may know. To misunderstand or to underestimate the modern day gatekeeper is the biggest mistake that you can make in your sales career.

So first we're going to give you five very important facts that you must know and understand about the modern gatekeeper and then we'll end with a powerful method to get past the gatekeeper screens that they use on you.

The first fact you must understand about today's gatekeeper is that they're smart! In the past, the gatekeeper may have been a temporary part time helper that just answered the telephone

and sent out the mail. Most gatekeepers today, on the other hand, are well educated and an increasing number of them usually have long term experience and knowledge of their company and industry.

Many gatekeepers started out with the company they're with, in other departments, and many of those were in sales. That's right. Many gatekeepers started out on the telephone in a customer service or other outgoing telephone sales position. Yes, many gatekeepers have as much or more cold calling experience than you!

The second fact about the modern day gatekeeper and closely following the first fact, is that today's gatekeepers are experienced sales people. In addition to having some direct cold calling experience, the gatekeeper has more direct involvement in selling situations than you can imagine.

Let me give you an example: take a gatekeeper who works for a small technology training company. This gatekeeper could answer the incoming calls for several decision makers. This one gatekeeper may handle the calls for the Human Resources Director, the Information Technology Director, the Help Desk Supervisor, the Sales Manager, the Database Manager, the Web Master, the CIO and the CEO.

Now, each one of those people are decision makers on some level. Therefore, each one of them receives tons of cold calls from dozens of sales people every single day and this one gatekeeper handles all of those calls! This gatekeeper deals with all types of sales people, with all levels of experience, selling all kinds of products and services.

This gatekeeper may have more direct interaction with cold calling in one year than most sales people may experience in their entire career. This gatekeeper has heard every cold calling approach and trick imaginable. Do you really think that your 20-year old, smile and dial, butterthem-up tactic will work on this person? No chance.

Next, remember that the gatekeeper has power. Years ago, gatekeepers were essentially messengers. The gatekeeper answered the telephone, gathered information from the caller, put the caller on hold and then asked the decision maker if he or she wanted to take the call. The decision maker usually made the decision to let the call go through or not.

Today however, many gatekeepers have sole discretion on whether to allow you through. Gatekeepers have detailed knowledge and awareness of the decision maker's needs, interest, time and schedule. The gatekeeper may also be very aware as to the **type** of sales person the decision maker is comfortable speaking with. Many gatekeepers can screen your call and lock you out without the decision maker ever knowing that you exist. So remember, they have a lot of power.

Also remember that some gatekeepers actually have some decision making authority too. It's very possible that when you make that cold call and get the gatekeeper, that you're actually speaking to the first level decision maker in your sales process.

Many gatekeepers have become long time, valuable and trusted members of their firm. Decision makers often assign important tasks to the gatekeeper. When considering a major purchase, the decision maker may assign the gatekeeper to do the initial legwork to narrow the field of potential suppliers. In that case, the gatekeeper does the basic research on potential suppliers. The gatekeeper may investigate companies, check out their history, look up and compare pricing, get quotes and even evaluate their sales processes and customer service atmosphere. So keep that in mind.

And finally and by far the most important fact that you must know about today's gatekeeper is that they serve as public relations people for their company and the decision maker. By that, we mean that businesses today understand that everyone is in the business of selling in some way, shape or form.

The person who answers the call must maintain a good and positive image because they never know who they might be speaking with. The gatekeeper is there to help the company and the decision maker uphold that image. What this means is that while the gatekeeper may indeed strongly screen out your call, he or she may not want it to seem that way.

In the past, the sales person could meet a harsh, even rude wall of clear and obvious resistance. While this still sometimes happens today, often the sales person faces a more subtle, often invisible barrier that is far more deadly. What makes this so bad is that many sales people who encounter this gatekeeper and who fail to reach the decision maker, may never even know that they were subjected to a gatekeeper screen. The sales person chalks it up to bad luck and poor timing. In this way, the sales person continues to try to reach the decision maker in vain.

Often, the sales person believes that they are building a relationship with the gatekeeper, hoping that eventually they will get through. The reality is that this is usually a sophisticated screen costing the sales person tremendous amounts of time, effort and money.

So, keep those five important facts in mind as we go forth...The modern gatekeeper

1. Is smart
2. Are sales people
3. They Have power
4. Some may have authority
5. And they're the director of first impressions for the firm too!

Now the key to getting past a gatekeeper screen is to do what the gatekeeper IS NOT trained to handle. The gatekeeper has extensive experience and what you have to do is identify the area in which they have little or no experience and exploit that area.

There are essentially two types of screens. You must first figure out what type of screen you are facing. The type of screen you face represents the type of training and experience the gatekeeper has. The type of screen shows what type of people the gatekeeper is most skilled in handling.

Once you recognise the type of screen, you can then adapt your approach to be a person for whom the gatekeeper has little or no experience dealing with or the type of person the gatekeeper usually puts through. Does that make sense?

The first screen we'll cover is the Investigative Screen. With the investigative screen, the gatekeeper asks you many questions. It's true that this gatekeeper may have the power to put you through at his or her own discretion; but these questions are usually for the gatekeeper and not so much for the decision maker.

Here's an example of an investigative screen:

- Gatekeeper: "ABC Computers. How may I help you?"
- Sales Person: "Could I speak with Bill Smith please?"
- Gatekeeper: "Who may I say is calling?"
- Sales Person: "It's Mark Williams at MTD"
- Gatekeeper: "And what's your call in connection with Mark?"
- Sales Person: "I'd like to talk to him about our mailing lists"
- Gatekeeper: "I'm sorry Mark, Bill is in a meeting at the moment, can I take a message for you?"

With this the gatekeeper asks you questions before they say that the decision maker is not available. Most of the time they don't even put you on hold to check.

This gatekeeper will usually have a pleasant personality and seem to be a very nice, innocent person. This gatekeeper will frequently engage you in small talk, which makes this such a dangerous and often concealed screen. Many sales people exchange pleasantries with this gatekeeper, and as you already know, that can be a fatal mistake.

The important thing to remember is that with this gatekeeper their primary asset is **time**. This gatekeeper has time, wants to use **your** time, and take time.

Then there is the Blind Screen. With this screen, the gatekeeper asks little or no questions and is never in a mood to talk. If your name is not on a "list" or the gatekeeper does not recognise you, then you're done.

Here's an example of a blind screen:

Gatekeeper: "ABC Computers. How may I help you?"

Sales Person: "Could I speak with Bill Smith please?"

Gatekeeper: "I'm sorry Bill is unavailable at the moment, who's calling?"

Sales Person: "It's Mark Williams at MTD"

Gatekeeper: "I'm sorry Mark Bill's unavailable, can I take a message?"

It's short and sweet and you're either in or you're out with no negotiation!

The polar opposite of the investigative screen, this gatekeeper usually has a sombre, very direct approach, has no time to chitchat and wants to rush you off the telephone as soon as possible. This gatekeeper speaks fast and curt and some of them even talk "down" to sales people in an almost insulting manner.

Ironically, the blind screen causes far less harm to the sales person than the investigative screen. Let me tell you why. You see, most sales people fear the blind screen gatekeeper so much that they choose not to call back, therefore they're able to move on instead of wasting valuable time on lost causes.

The important thing to remember with the blind screen gatekeeper is that their primary asset is a lack of time and control.

Ok. Now the reason it's so important to be able to quickly discern the type of screen, is that each requires the exact opposite technique to get through. First, let's look at getting past an Investigative screen.

Remember, this gatekeeper has time and wants to engage in small talk. Therefore, you want to immediately exude the personality of a person who is in no mood to talk and has no time.

To get past this screen, you need to do and be the exact opposite of what this gatekeeper wants, expects and knows how to handle. The investigative gatekeeper wants to talk, ask questions and chitchat. Therefore, you want to project the mood, attitude and personality of someone who is in no mood to talk, answer questions or chitchat.

When you face the investigative screen, you want to exude the attitude of an important, busy executive who is in a hurry and expects to be put through.

You have no doubt called on and spoken to this type of person before. They're not rude or mean, just serious and business-like. So you'll need to project the personality and tone of voice of someone who expects to be connected---immediately.

With this gatekeeper, you may not even always want to use your name to begin the call and appear to get slightly irritated when the gatekeeper asks. Please note, this is referring to the **attitude** and **demeanour** you need to project, not the actual words. Do not be mean or rude. Simply **project** the **personality** of a very serious person. Talk fast and curt.

Here's an example:

Gatekeeper: "ABC Computers. How may I help you?"

Sales Person: "Yes, Bill Smith please"

Gatekeeper: "Who may I say is calling?"

Sales Person: "Mark Williams at MTD - is Bill in? thanks"

With this approach, you force the gatekeeper to make a quick decision not allowing them any time to think or ask questions. The gatekeeper must decide to continue with the preverbal third degree, and consequently risk angering a VIP, a potential customer or indeed a friend of the decision maker. On the other hand, the gatekeeper can just put you through and let the decision maker handle it. In this instance putting you through is simply a safer option for the gatekeeper. Remember today's gatekeepers are your company's voice and first impression to the world so it's a high risk strategy to continue to grill you with questions for fear of really annoying someone who is important.

Now let's look at getting through the blind screen

With this gatekeeper, you also want to be the exact opposite of what they expect and normally handle. This gatekeeper talks fast and is on the lookout for the high-level sales professional. So be the exact opposite.

You want to exude the personality of a VIP, but one who talks painfully slow, has an overly friendly attitude, and who wants to talk to everybody.

You have called on and spoken with this person before: They want to tell you their entire life story, and it seems to take you forever to get around to talking business. However, they are usually so nice and harmless, that it's hard to be abrupt with them. That's exactly who you want to be to get through the blind screen.

Here's an example:

Gatekeeper: "ABC Computers. How may I help you?"

Sales Person: "Ah, yes, hello there, could I speak with Bill Smith please?"

Gatekeeper: "I'm sorry Bill is unavailable at the moment, who's calling?"

Sales Person: "yes, err, it's Mark Williams here at MTD, I've just read on your website that you've won a customer service award at ABC Computers for your commitment to excellence, I bet Bills well chuffed with that?"

Gatekeeper: "Yes, he is. I'm sorry Mark, Bill's unavailable, can I take a message?"

Sales Person: "I bet he's happy, he's done wonders there since moving from TD Computers. Is he still interested in his golf?"

Gatekeeper: "Yes, he still plays regularly. Bill's unavailable; would you like me to tell him that you called?"

Sales Person: "If you could put me through that would be great, it would be good to catch up with him, thanks"

Hopefully that example gives you a good idea of how to get through the blind screen. Once again it's the concept and approach that's most important rather than the actual words we've used.

With this, once again, you force the gatekeeper to make a quick decision: To go on and allow you to continue wasting their time, or just put you through. You seem harmless. In fact, if you do this correctly, the gatekeeper will not see you as a sales person who poses threat.

So to summarise, to get passed more gatekeepers and screens, you need to do the opposite of what the gatekeeper expects and has been trained to handle. If the gatekeeper is looking to stop the fast talking smooth sales person, then you want to be a slow talking, confused person who is anything but smooth. On the other hand, if the gatekeeper wants to talk and ask questions, then you want to be a fast talking person who has no time to talk and answer questions. Force the gatekeeper to make a quick decision and they'll connect you rather than risk making a big mistake.

Here's a quick overview

Remember the traits of the Investigative Screen. The gatekeeper asks you lots of questions, they usually have a nice personality, they like to talk and seem to have lots of time to spare

And your solution to getting through this screen is to be someone who is a very busy executive who does not like small talk. Be confident; your voice must carry the air of positive expectation.

You must speak as though you fully expect this gatekeeper to put you through almost as if you own the place.

Then remember the Blind Screen. This gatekeeper asks few or no questions at all, if you're not on the list or recognised then you don't stand a chance, they usually have a direct manner and they don't like to talk and remember they come across as having little time to waste.

The way to deal with the blind screen is to be a jolly executive who talks slow and wants to talk to everyone---all day. Your voice must carry an air of no-fear and positive expectation, but also you need to sound innocent non-threatening. Don't be sharp and quick. Speak slowly and methodical.

Using these ideas will not get you past every screen, but you'll get through a few more screens, reach a few more decision makers and close a few more contracts.

Next time you call, which type of gatekeeper will you find and how will this determine who you will be? Join us again soon for some more MTD Sales Training tips



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