

## 2.3: Qualifying

### Learning Objectives

- Identify resources to use when prospecting.

In the last section, you read that prospecting can be compared to setting up the plans and laying the foundation for a building project. You could also say that prospecting is a little like going to class or making your bed—you've got to do it, and you know that it won't be long before you're doing it again (assuming you make your bed regularly!). Because prospecting is one of those jobs that's never truly finished, it's helpful to draw on a number of sources and be creative about the places where you find your leads.

### Where to Find Prospects

Knowing your ideal customer (buyer persona) and where he or she is likely to go for information will allow you to choose the best prospecting sources for your business. It helps to *be* your customer. Imagine yourself in your prospect's shoes and think about where you would go for information. For instance, if you are a photographer who specializes in professional yearbook and graduation pictures, you might want to set up a Facebook and Instagram account so you can let students in local schools (and parents) know about your services. Meanwhile, if you're in B2B sales and your ideal prospects are car dealerships in northern California, you might build up your professional network by joining the local branch of the National Auto Dealers Association or by joining some community organizations in your city.

Prospecting takes knowledge and creativity, so start your prospecting and qualifying with the top ten power prospecting list below. No matter what business you're in, think of this section as your GPS for finding the leads that will fuel your business growth.

### Top Prospecting Sources

1. Existing customers
2. Referrals
3. Networking and social networking
4. Online databases and directories
5. Trade shows and events
6. Being a subject matter expert
7. Cold calling

### Power Prospecting Source #1: Existing Customers

It costs four to five times more to attract a new customer than to keep an existing customer. Jeff Bressler, “Customer Retention Versus Customer Acquisition” *Forbes*, December 12, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/12/12/customer-retention-versus-customer-acquisition/?sh=14e7a0221c7d> (accessed May 22, 2024). So it stands to reason that your best new customers are your existing customers. Salespeople who make an effort to deliver excellent customer service during *and* after a sale know the secret that some of their best prospects are the customers they already have. To keep and develop your existing customers, love them, service them, be partners with them, live and breathe in their world, understand them, and anticipate their needs, and you will succeed in sales.

One of the keys to retaining your best customers is to keep in touch with your customers' needs and update your solutions as their needs change. Say you work for a marketing company that offers a variety of services to businesses. One of your customers, a record company, is using your printing services, but they're turning to another organization for their public relations needs. If you're aware of this, your existing customer is now a prospect for additional sales. You might tell the record company, “You know, your current PR people are setting up events and concerts to increase your publicity, and that seems to be working only moderately well. If we were running your PR, we would integrate your events with a variety of other media. For instance, we think a blog would be a hugely effective tool...” If the company is already a loyal customer and you let them know that you are aware of their needs and can offer a better solution, then you may very well make a new sale.

## Power Prospecting Source #2: Referrals

There's nothing more powerful than getting information about a product or service from a friend or people you trust before you buy. Think about the last time you bought a printer. You probably checked out the customer reviews on Amazon, asked your friends, checked out some blogs, and maybe even got some insights on CNET or X (formerly Twitter). Before you bought the Hewlett-Packard (HP) OfficeJet 6310, you knew exactly what to expect from people who have bought and used the product, and you learned that if you buy it at Office Depot, you get free shipping and two free ink cartridges. Although you never shopped at Office Depot before, you were sold before you even clicked "buy now" on the Office Depot's website. Imagine that you didn't even come in contact with HP or Office Depot. You made your purchase based solely on the information from others. The power of the referral cannot be underestimated.

Referrals and word-of-mouth advertising have always been one of the most effective—and cost-efficient—ways to get new customers. It used to be that the circle of referrals was limited to people who used your product or service in a given geographic area. The Internet has amplified that network, especially with user-generated content such as communities, blogs, customer ratings and reviews, and social networking sites. So as a salesperson, you have to think creatively about all of resources you have to generate referrals.

Seth Godin, best-selling author and entrepreneur, talks about "flipping the funnel." He challenges salespeople to think about turning the sales funnel on its side, thinking of it as a megaphone, and then handing the megaphone to those who already love you. He suggests that when many of your customers enter into the conversation on websites, the power of your message gets even stronger, and new referrals find you. Seth Godin, "How to Flip the Sales Funnel," video, *Selling Power*, <https://www.sellingpower.com/videos/0EcPWFIIqqg/how-to-flip-the-sales-funnel> (accessed May 22, 2024).

Want to see how it works? When Naked Pizza, a small takeout and delivery operation in New Orleans, decided they wanted to compete with the city's chain pizza places, they turned to their existing customer base for sales prospects by putting their Twitter address on every pizza box that went out the door. As Jeff, Randy, and Brock, the company's founders put it, "Even your most core customers must be continually and softly nudged." Jeff Leach, Randy Crochet, and Brock Fillinger, "How One Small Business Uses Twitter to Build Its Brand," *Advertising Age*, May 29, 2009, <http://adage.com> (accessed June 9, 2009). The prospecting effort has been a huge success with their existing customers posting tweets that have introduced the brand to new customers. The Twitter-enabled follow-ups allowed Naked Pizza to continue the conversation and ensure that a greater number of first-time buyers become repeat customers—and that *they* spread the word to more new customers. Talk about a megaphone!

So let your customers speak for you. Their voices will be heard by people you could never reach.

## Power Prospecting Source #3: Networking and Social Networking

Networking works.

The art of networking, developing mutually beneficial relationships, can be a valuable prospecting tool, not only for retaining old prospects, but also for connecting with new ones. The larger and more diverse your network becomes, the bigger your pool of potential prospects. Your networking connections often become sources of referrals for your business, just as you will become a referral source for theirs.

If you're a member of the American Chemical Society and you work for a chemical supply company, you might use your membership to get acquainted with chemists who work at a variety of labs. You could offer them your card and let them know that you provide supply discounts for fellow Chemical Society members. Now these prospects will be more likely to buy their chemical supplies from you than from a company or individual with whom they have no personal connection. If one of your customers needs a chemist with a particular specialty, you, in turn, will be able to refer him to someone in your network. Joining a professional trade association is one simple way to network with others in your field, or with prospects in your target industry.

If your business is location specific, joining community organizations can also be a valuable tool for connecting with local business leaders and prospects. Consider service organizations (like the Rotary Club), fraternity organizations, and other affinity groups that will allow you to build relationships with members of the community.

What about social networking? You're probably well acquainted with online social networking sites like Facebook or Instagram, but you may be less familiar with the ways people leverage these tools in a professional capacity. According to professional networking expert Clara Shih, online social networks can be an effective means of prospecting for sales with organizations. After all, the decision makers at any organization are *individuals* with whom you can build relationships (remember, even though it's called business-to-business, buying decisions are made person-to-person, so relationships matter). Clara Shih, *The Facebook Era*

(Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009), 2. By connecting socially with key individuals, not only can you open lines of communications with potential customers, but you can also build your knowledge of your prospect base.

Professional networking sites like LinkedIn are extremely important as well. Your profile on professional networking sites becomes a tool for selling yourself as a brand. These sites allow you to list your education, professional experience, and testimonials from satisfied customers, and as you add contacts, you become connected to their contacts, allowing your network to grow. Marie Ennis-O'Connor, "How to Build A Professional Network on LinkedIn", July 1, 2023, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-b...nnis-o-connor/> (accessed May 22, 2024). LinkedIn is also a great place to position yourself as a 'subject matter expert' by posting blogs, tips, and helpful content.

### Power Prospecting Source #4: Online Databases and Directories

Going to the library can be hugely helpful because it gives you access to people who are pros at finding information. Also, the added perk is that your library will probably give you free access to several online business directories and databases. Of course you can search these directories from the comfort of your own home or office, but if you want the deluxe package—the most up-to-date directories that cover industries of all types nationwide—you'll have to pay a price. Online business directories, such as those listed in the table below, are searchable by industry and will give you access to company contact info, number of employees, financial standing, industry rankings, names of executives, and other company profile information. Most of these directories allow you to search businesses by SIC or NAICS codes.

So how do you know which business directory to use? For one thing, it helps to know whether your ideal prospect would be a private company or a public company or whether it could be either. Is your ideal prospect a large organization that attracts top executives? In this case, you'll mostly be searching for **public companies**—companies that sell stocks and bonds to the general public. Public companies are required to file financial information and other company reports with the U.S. government, so these organizations are easier to find in general business directories, and their directory listings usually provide more detailed company information. However, not all large companies are publicly owned. State Farm Insurance and Cargill Foods, for example, are both private companies. If you're only interested in smaller, local businesses, you will be dealing with **private companies**, or companies that aren't owned by the public. In this case, some directories and databases will be more helpful to you than others.

Another thing to consider is whether you want the option to refine your search to include a number of criteria closely matching your ideal prospect profile. Several online databases allow you to input multiple search terms like location, company size, and minimum and maximum sales volumes. Examples include Data Axle Usa, Clarivate, Biz Journals, Hoovers, and Standard and Poor's.

### Power Prospecting Source #5: Trade Shows and Events

If you've ever been to a **trade show** or expo, like a career fair or bridal show, you know they're a good place to find out about products and services about which you might not otherwise be aware (and to get some fun free giveaways while you're at it). While most people who stop by a given booth at an expo might *not* be seriously interested prospects, trade show displays and product demonstrations generate enough strong leads to make this activity a worthwhile prospecting endeavor. For one thing, trade shows are industry-specific events that have the advantage of bringing your target market to you.

As a salesperson, you can use trade shows not only to present and demonstrate your products but also to identify and qualify prospects. Barton A. Weitz, Sephen B. Castleberry, and John F. Tanner, Jr., *Selling: Building Partnerships* (New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2003). Asking a few specific questions can help you assess a prospect's needs and determine whether he has a genuine interest—as well as the resources—for buying. Trade show booths usually have a place for leads to enter their contact information so you can follow up with your prospects and save leads in your customer database. If you are a sales representative for a textbook company and you attend a faculty book fair at a large university, when professors stop by your booth, you might ask them which texts they are currently using and what they like or dislike about these books. This is a quick way to identify potential need. One professor might tell you she uses such-and-such a textbook, which is thorough, but her students don't find it very engaging. Aha! You have identified a need, and you now have a prospect. You might tell the professor about a textbook that covers similar information but uses a more conversational style and ask if she would like you to send her a complimentary copy. If she says yes, you now have an opportunity to take her contact information, and you have permission to follow up.

## Power Prospecting Source #6: Direct Marketing

When you think of “junk mail,” you probably think about something you would normally throw in the trash. But have you ever received a direct-mail advertisement that you’ve actually considered, or even responded to? Maybe you’re a member of the American Library Association, and someone has sent you an e-mail about an upcoming library conference in a nearby city because you opted in, or gave permission to receive information from the company. Or maybe a local real estate agent has sent out fliers to the residential areas in your zip code and you just happen to be thinking of selling your house.

As a sales professional, **direct marketing**, or communication in the form of direct mail or e-mail sent directly to your potential prospects, gives you the advantage of reaching a large pool of leads without having to invest the time to individually contact each one. Methods such as direct mail and e-mail allow your prospects to self-qualify since only the ones with genuine interest will follow up. On the flip side, direct mail yields a lower rate of return than most other methods of advertising. The average response rates for direct mail fall between **2.7-4.4 percent**. Contrast that with email’s average response rate of 0.6 percent, and you’ll see why direct mail can be especially impactful. <https://www.baesman.com/news-insight...nd-sms-in-2023> (accessed May 22, 2024). These methods can still be worth the investment, considering the relatively low inputs of time and money it takes to reach so many. SMS (short message service texting) can be a highly effective choice with open rates of up to 98%. Stanzie Cote, “*The Future of Sales Follow-Ups: Text Messages*”, <https://www.gartner.com/en/digital-m...-text-messages> October 4, 2019 (accessed May 22, 2024)

However, the time and money you *do* put into direct mailing or e-mail campaigns will be wasted if you send out your communications at random. There are three ways you can go about generating targeted mailing lists:

1. Every major city has organizations that specialize in mailing list research, allowing you to order up-to-date address lists organized by zip code, income, age, interests, or other characteristics that matter to you. For as little as \$25, you can get lists of up to a thousand prospects.
2. Many of the business directories and databases you read about earlier in this section provide e-mail and postal mailing addresses for businesses and private households based on specific criteria.
3. Professional salespeople also develop personal directories for their mailing lists and text initiatives. When you meet prospects, trade business cards with them and connect on LinkedIn. If these prospects pass your initial stages of qualification, you can add them to your personal list of mail recipients.

## Power Prospecting Source #7: Cold Calling

In the span of a decade, Pat Cavanaugh, CEO of a Pittsburgh-based promotional products company, grew his business 2,000 percent—and he did it almost all of it through cold calling. **Cold calling**, or making an unsolicited phone call or visit to a prospective customer, can be quite effective for the salespeople who know the right approach, but it’s also most salespeople’s least favorite prospecting activity. For one thing, you never know whether the person on the other end of the line will be rude or hang up on you altogether. Most salespeople feel pressured to actually sell their product or make a pitch during a cold call. While technology has certainly changed over the last 20 years, Cavanaugh’s advice still holds true: calling isn’t about making sales; it’s about establishing a connection with the prospect. Susan Greco, “The Nonstop, 24-7 CEO Salesman,” *Inc.*, August 2000, [www.inc.com/magazine/20000801/19766.html](http://www.inc.com/magazine/20000801/19766.html) (accessed May 22, 2024). According to Cavanaugh, it’s essential to get the prospect to like you in the first thirty seconds. While this may *sound* like it’s putting a lot of pressure on you as the caller, you can actually think of it as a way of taking the pressure off. Remember, you don’t have to sell your product during the call; the goal is only to make a positive connection. You don’t have to lay the schmoose on either. Instead, be direct and sincere, and be yourself. Your prospect, who is probably very busy, will appreciate directness and brevity.

A cold call is a perfect way to find out at what stage the lead is in of his buying process. She might still be a lead for future sales, but at this time she isn’t a qualified prospect. For that matter, if your lead seems unreceptive, you might also decide to end the call or to offer to try back at another time. Ultimately, it’s important that your prospective buyer doesn’t feel like she’s being pressured in any way; people have come to expect pushy salesmen and saleswomen on the phone, and you want to set yourself apart from this perception.

If the lead *does* have a problem that you can address, you should go ahead and offer to make an appointment to meet in person. Again, there should be no pressure on either end; your prospect will accept an appointment if she is interested. If she doesn’t agree to an appointment, don’t try to press it. Sometimes, it may simply be a matter of timing: your prospect might ask you to call back in few months. In this case, get your calendar out and set up a *specific* time when you can try to call back. For instance, “Three months from now will be early March. Is it all right for me to try calling again then?” If she agrees, go a step further and ask

something like this: “In the meantime, would it be OK if I sent you occasional updates by e-mail to let you know about new developments and promotions with our product?” This enables you to periodically follow up so that you maintain a connection with your lead.

Finally, it’s important to research your prospect before making a call. You should know the size and scope of the company, key people, company culture, and anything about the company that has recently come up in the news. Doing your research allows you to personalize your introduction. After explaining who you are, you might say, “I recently read in *Crain’s Chicago Business* that your company’s number one priority in the coming year is doubling revenues by increasing your sales force....” Doing your research and keeping a few simple tips in mind should take the pressure off in cold calling and give you the confidence to establish crucial prospect connections.

## Organizing Your Prospect Information

If you’ve ever ordered shoes from Zappos, you might be aware that the company is known for its excellent customer service. But you might not know one of their secrets to achieving this: keeping detailed records of every interaction they have with a customer. These records are part of a **customer relationship management (CRM)** system, the tools a company uses to record and organize their contacts with current and prospective customers. If you ever shop at Amazon, you’ll notice the product suggestions that pop up on your screen when you log on. That’s also an example of how CRM is used.

## Choosing a System

CRM software allows you to maintain relationships in a systematic way, following up more consistently with your leads and continuing to meet the needs of your existing customers. If the individual with whom you’ve been doing business at a particular company leaves, you should update that in your database and begin prospecting for another lead at the company. If you’ve recently mailed, emailed or texted information to some of your leads, CRM software will help you keep track of which customers the information went to and how recently it went out, so you know when to follow up with those prospects by phone. You have a huge range of CRM programs from which to choose, and while these applications were once large-business luxuries, there are now options that are priced within the reach of smaller businesses as well. “*Best CRM Software Of 2024*”, <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/busin...-crm-software/>, May 14, 2024 (accessed May 22, 2024).

## Gathering Intelligence

If you know your prospect is an eight-year-old online auction house with fifty-two employees operating out of Atlanta, that’s information—statistics you regularly update in your customer databases. These are facts that your competitors can also easily access using a simple online directory search. But what about the last time you visited your prospect in person? While waiting to meet with your contact, you overheard the receptionist talking about the complaints the company had been getting recently because of their confusing Web page layout. If you represent a Web design firm, that’s valuable information, and it’s news your competitor can’t access. In other words, it’s not just information, it’s *intelligence*. You can use this intelligence to your advantage when you put it together with other information. In this situation, assume you happen to know that one of the competing design firms in town just lost its best online retail specialist, while *your* company has two designers who have worked with similar online retailers in the past. So you know your company can address your prospect’s need in a unique way. Now you’re armed with *competitive intelligence*. Keeping your eyes and ears open for intelligence during every interaction is an important part of prospecting, and it’s particularly important to track the intelligence you gather in your customer databases. You never know when it might prove useful.

It’s also helpful to think about information that will help you make a personal connection to your prospect (remember how important the emotional connection is). Your observations and information gathering should carry over to personal details like your prospect’s family, his birthday, or his hobbies. Include these insights as part of your organized records, too. It might seem strange at first to make a formal record of personal details, but keeping track of things like the name of your prospect’s two children sends the message that you care about the person, not just his business, and this in turn builds customer loyalty. Upscale hotels like the Four Seasons do this kind of customer relationship management particularly well. Receptionists and concierges track personal details of repeat customers, learning to greet them by name and ask about specific details from previous visits: “Did your sister like the gift you bought her last time you were here?” or “How was your recent trip to Japan?”

## Keep It Up-to-Date

Things can change quickly in business, particularly at large companies. The account manager you spoke with last month may have moved to another company yesterday, or the purchasing agent who seemed excited about your product last year may have had to



deal with significant budget cuts this year that prevent him from buying again. That's why it's crucial to keep your prospect information current. If your competitor sees an opportunity before you do, you're likely to lose yourself a prospect. And if the individual with whom you've been doing business at a company is no longer working there, it's important to find another key person to contact soon if you want to keep your customer. Following companies and people on LinkedIn, as well as setting Google alerts, can help you follow when there's turnover of key personnel, or when companies in your industry merge or split off, or even when a client (or prospect) with an award or a contract. Every day. Google News Alerts (<http://google.com/alerts>) is a free service that sends you e-mail updates of the latest Google search results based on your choice of search criteria so you can keep current on your competitors and prospects.

## Qualifying Your Prospects

After you've identified your prospects, it's important to understand that *all customers are not created equal*. Some customers are willing to form business partnerships and grow with you over time while others are just looking to do business with whoever offers the lowest price. Some prospects may never be able to help you or your company achieve your business goals, or their goals may not be strategically aligned with yours, even if you really like doing business with them. Choosing customers carefully will save you time and energy and help you meet your goals. You don't want to spend several hours writing up a proposal for one of your prospects only to find out they were never genuinely interested. Paul Cherry, *Questions That Sell: The Powerful Process of Discovering What Your Customer Really Wants* (New York: AMACOM, 2006), 37.

Think back to the sales funnel and the idea that you start out with a large pool of leads and end with a much smaller number of customers. While it is important to cast your nets broadly when you're rounding up leads, you'll work most effectively if you weed out the likely from the unlikely early on. You can qualify your leads to determine whether they are legitimate prospects by discovering whether they have the *willingness* and the *ability* to make a purchase. Consider these five questions to help you meet your qualifying objectives:

- **Does your prospect have a need?** This is the most basic thing to figure out about your prospect. There is no use pursuing another individual in the company or delivering a persuasive presentation if there is nothing you can do for this person or organization. If you sell new cars, and your lead is satisfied with the car he bought three months ago, you don't have anything to offer him.
- **Does he or she have the authority to make the buying decision?** You can try to sell candy to a five-year-old, and he'll probably want to buy it, but unless you can convince his parents to make the purchase you don't have a sale. Similarly, your lead at a company may love your product and tell you it's exactly what her company needs. But if she isn't the person with the power to buy, she isn't a qualified prospect. This doesn't mean you should write the company off, but you'll have to figure out how to get in touch with the person who *can* make the buying decision.
- **Does he or she have the resources to purchase the product or service?** Sometimes knowing the answer to this question involves contacting the lead and asking some questions. Other times, you can figure this out by doing company research before ever getting in touch with the lead. You wouldn't have tried to make a major sale to Circuit City just before they went out of business because they wouldn't have had the resources to buy.
- **Does he or she have the willingness to purchase the product?** Even if your lead has the resources and authority to buy, he might not be interested in what you're selling. He might be dead set on a Caribbean cruise when you are selling packages to a ski resort.
- **Do you have access to the influencer or decision makers?** This is relatively straightforward in B2C sales, but in B2B, it can be hard. If you wanted to sell your clothing line to Macy's, you couldn't go downtown to your local branch and pitch your product. Large organizations have layers of personnel, and it's challenging to ferret out the people whose can influence the buying decision. Think about whether you *can* reasonably access these individuals.

## Managing Your Prospect Base

So you've qualified your prospect and you have his or her information in your CRM system. It would be nice if that were all it took. But your CRM is only a way of tracking and organizing customer information; making an **action plan**, a specific plan of approach, for each customer is up to you. And you won't make any sales if you don't act.

After qualifying, you might have some prospects with a clear need, buying authority, and a fairly high level of interest, while others seem uncertain. If you classify your prospects as "hot," "warm," and "cold," you can prioritize by devoting the most initial energy to your top potential customers. "How To Organize Cold, Hot & Warm Leads in Sales Pipeline", June 20, 2022, <https://www.corefactors.in/blog/how-to-organize-cold-hot-warm-leads-in-sales-pipeline/> (accessed May 22, 2024). No two

customers are alike. This means that even though you've qualified prospects A and B and determined that they *do* have needs you think you can meet, those needs will be different, possibly drastically so. It's a good idea to begin your action plan by conducting a careful needs analysis—that is, what specific problems is this prospect facing and how can my product help solve those problems?

Finally, think about the next steps in the sales process. Based on this customer's specific needs, how will you design your pre-approach? What details should be in your presentation, when should you make your presentation, and how and when will you try to close? Develop a timeline and plot out the steps. If you can envision the sale, you are already halfway there.

### Key Takeaways

- Prospecting takes creativity and knowledge. You have to look for potential buyers in many places.
- **Existing customers** and referrals can be excellent sources of prospects because the customers are already familiar with your service and can speak on your behalf.
- **Networking** provides the opportunity to leverage your existing relationships to develop new leads.
- Business directories and databases (in print and online), trade publications, business journals, are all excellent sources to identify leads.
- **Trade shows** and events give you an opportunity to talk to prospects.
- Advertising and **direct marketing** provide a way to reach out to many prospects who may have an interest in your product or service.
- **Cold calling** is an opportunity to approach the prospect and learn more about how you can meet her needs.
- Being a **subject matter expert** can set you apart and help generate leads because of your expertise.
- Qualifying the lead includes identifying if the prospect is ready, willing, and able to make a purchasing decision about your product or service.

---

This page titled [2.3: Qualifying](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Lisa O'Halloran \(Northeast Wisconsin Technical College\)](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.

- [7.4: Go Fish - Resources to Help You Find Your Prospects](#) by Anonymous is licensed [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#). Original source: <https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/powerful-selling>.