

# Cold Calls

By MARJO JOHNE

Interview with Colleen Francis

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When Maria Kim returned to Toronto after a two-year stay in England, she had no job and no prospects.

But rather than fire off a bunch of résumés and wait for employers to call her, she picked up the phone and began calling companies she wanted to work for.

"I'd introduce myself to the head of whatever division I was interested in and ask if they would be available for an information session, where I could learn more about them and their company," recalls Ms. Kim, who worked in London for a marketing firm. "About 60 per cent of the time, people said 'yes.' "

For Ms. Kim, a public relations professional, calling strangers out of the blue in hopes of making a job connection was no big deal. During her job search, she sometimes made as many as 10 of these so-called "cold calls" a day to senior executives she had never met.

And her perseverance paid off. One of those calls to Erin Rogers, vice-president and director of Fusion Alliance Marketing in Toronto, resulted in an information session.

That, in turn, led to a one-month contract with Fusion in August, 2004. And when the contract expired, Ms. Rogers offered Ms. Kim a full-time job as an account manager, a position she still holds.

Unlike Ms. Kim, many job hunters hang up on the idea of cold calling to find employment. Some feel uncomfortable about making unsolicited contact; others don't think it's an effective way to get work.

Colleen Francis, president of Engage Selling Solutions Inc., an Ottawa-based company that provides sales training, describes cold calling as the "most despised task ever," even for salespeople.

"Our studies [of salespeople] show that it takes 25 phone calls to get one interested person who'll say 'wow, sounds perfect, come in and see me.' From our research on salespeople, we know that many don't get the [cold] calls done, so I can see why a lot of job applicants don't want to do it, either."

But while they may despise it, job hunters cannot afford to exclude cold calling from their search strategy, says Marilyn Murray, an employment counsellor with YWCA Vancouver's Professional and Technical Workers' Program.

When done right, a cold call can ring up a job offer or, at the very least, plug job hunters into a referral network to which they might not otherwise have access, she says.

"You usually only need to make one or two good connections to get results," Ms. Murray notes.

"Even if those companies aren't hiring right now, if you make a good impression, they'll refer you to other people they know who might be hiring."

Managers on the receiving end of a good cold call are often impressed by the caller's initiative and tenacity, Ms. Murray says.

"Most people know how much nerve it takes to make a cold call. The fact that you made that call shows employers that you're a keen and motivated individual -- someone they'd want to hire."

Cold calling has certainly worked for Sherri Fraser, a science writer and research funding consultant in Calgary.

While earning her science degree at the University of Calgary, she found summer work by phoning laboratories and inquiring if they needed help. After graduating, she mass-mailed résumés to a number of colleges and universities, then followed up by phone.

One of the calls she made led to a job interview in Houston, Tex., with the Baylor College of Medicine. The college offered Ms. Fraser a research position.

"At the very least, a cold call is a good way of getting your résumé pulled out from that big pile sitting on someone's desk," says Ms. Fraser, who worked at Baylor for two years before returning to Calgary. "It increases your chances of getting an interview."

Ms. Murray says the direct "are you hiring" approach is fine for student jobs and other junior positions.

But for executives and professionals, she recommends Ms. Kim's tactic of asking for a face-to-face meeting, where the stated objective is for the caller to find out more about the company and the person on the other end of the line.

"When you're just calling to ask for a job, you're not developing any relationships. It's basically 'no, we're not hiring' and you say 'okay, goodbye,' " she says.

"But when you go in not looking for a job but more looking for information, then you'll stand a better chance of making a connection, and people always want to hire someone they have a connection to."

But to make that connection, job hunters must first grab a prospective employer's attention by presenting their work skills and experience in a way that is relevant to the company, Ms. Francis says.

And they need to do that in the first 30 seconds of the call, Ms. Francis suggests.

She also says that cold callers should find out as much as they can about the companies and people on their to-call list by researching the Web, newspapers and financial reports, then use that information to think about how they might fit in.

That's exactly how Ms. Kim approached cold calling.

Before getting on the phone, she got on the Internet and searched out target companies. One on her list was Quebec City-based marketing and communications firm Cossette Communication Group Inc. Through her research, she learned about Fusion, Cossette's sponsorship division in Toronto.

During her cold call to Fusion, Ms. Kim immediately brought up the sponsorship work she had done in London for Orange SA, a mobile phone network owned by France Télécom SA.

"I knew that Cossette had Bell [Canada] as a client so I let them know right away that I had worked on the Orange account in London," Ms. Kim says. "I also knew that sponsorship was the main focus of this division, so I also mentioned that I worked on sponsorship activities at Orange."

Not once during her conversation did Ms. Kim mention she was looking for work. Instead, she explained how curious she was about the company and, in particular, about Ms. Rogers' work and how she had got to her position.

Ms. Murray says Ms. Kim's approach was effective because it is non-threatening and flatters the person on the other end of the line.

"People love to talk about themselves," she says. "Also, most professionals feel a certain obligation to support other people within their professional community."

Ms. Rogers agrees. She says she frequently grants information sessions as a way of helping up-and-coming talent. "I remember when I was in that position and there were several people who had done the same for me."

But she is selective about who she agrees to meet with.

Callers who have obviously not done their homework will get a polite refusal, Ms. Rogers says. On the other hand, callers like Ms. Kim, who do their research before picking up the phone, are likely to elicit a positive response.

"What I liked about Maria's call at the time was that she knew my business and she spoke about work experience that was relevant to me," Ms. Rogers says.

She adds that she also appreciates it when cold callers are considerate about butting into her busy schedule.

"It's nice when they preface the call with 'I know you're busy,' instead of just assuming that I'll make time for them," she says.

Ms. Francis says callers should ask for permission before launching into their pitch. This can be done with a simple "did I catch you at a bad time?" she suggests.

"Ninety-five per cent [of employers] will say 'yes, but what's up?' " she says. "And what this does is turn the tables so that the conversation becomes their idea, because they've just given you permission to go ahead with your spiel."

Perhaps the most important lesson to learn, however, is how to get over the fear of making that cold call, says Ms. Francis. The best way to get over the jitters, she says, is to write a script -- based on your skills and what you know about the company -- and then practice delivering it before picking up the phone.

The worst that can happen, Ms. Francis says, is that the person on the other end of the line will say 'no.'

Then again, as Ms. Kim found out, the reception to a cold call could be much warmer.

"Don't be afraid to make that call," is Ms. Kim's advice to anyone looking for work. "Do your research first, take a deep breath, then pick up the phone."

### **How to get a warm response to a cold call**

Here are some tips from the pros:

**Research, research, research.** Before you make that call, load up on information about the company, its competitors and the person you're calling. Get on the Web, dig through newspapers, magazines and financial reports .

**Make an instant connection.** Use the knowledge you've gained about a company to immediately establish common ground, says Colleen Francis, president of Engage Selling Solutions Inc. of Ottawa. For instance, if you're calling a company that exports to China, be sure to mention your marketing experience in Asia.

**Write a script and practise its delivery.** You don't want to blather so you must prepare a spiel and rehearse it until it sounds natural, advises Michael Johnson, president of a Toronto chapter of Toastmasters International, which teaches public-speaking skills.

You could forego the script once you've become a confident cold-caller, but Mr. Johnson suggests you still write down key points you want to cover.

**Keep it short, sweet and to the point.** Deliver your spiel in 10 seconds or less, then cut right to your request.

For instance, says Marilyn Murray, an employment counsellor with YWCA Vancouver, you might say something like: "Hello, my name is Joe Blow, I've worked in marketing for 10 years, focusing mostly on pharmaceutical products, and I'm currently exploring different areas in biotechnology. I know you've been very successful in your career and I'd like to request a 20-minute information session to find out more about what you do and how you got to your position today."

**Practise the sincerest form of flattery.** Adjust your speech to imitate the style, tone and speed of the person at the other end of the line, Ms. Francis recommends. "This makes people feel more comfortable with you."

**Ask for information, not work.** Instead of asking whether the organization might have a job for you, stick to requesting an information session to learn more about the company and the person you phoned. Most employers prefer this approach because it doesn't create false expectations about jobs that may not exist at the time, Ms. Murray says.

And if the meeting doesn't go well, the employer is not obligated to follow up and explain why a job offer isn't on the table.

**Smile.** The people you're calling won't see it but they'll hear it in your voice, Ms. Murray says. It will also help you relax.

**Skip the voice mail.** People are unlikely to return cold calls, Ms. Murray says, so forget about leaving a message. Instead, she suggests trying to catch people at their desks by calling at different times throughout the day.

**Learn to deal with rejection.** Even the most seasoned cold-caller will get a "no" from time to time, so don't take rejection personally, Mr. Johnson says.

Instead, keep the connection open by asking when would be a good time for you to call again. And if you run into any information you think might be of interest to a company you phoned, send it to your contact there. That way, the next time you phone, you'll be considered a warm caller instead of a cold, unsolicited contact.