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Q.

My company, LaundrySpa, started as a laundry service in Manhattan. I developed a product to remove stains and have decided to stop the laundry service and concentrate on selling this product. I'm currently selling 50-75 units of our "Special Stain Remover" product daily (mostly to my former laundry clients), and it will soon be featured in the media. I'd like to first approach boutique pharmacies that sell cutting-edge products. What is the best way to approach them?

-Notoya Green, The Laundry Spa.

A.

You're off to a strong start. Your publicity "buzz" and confidence will go a long way in strengthening your sales pitch. The best way to market to any new customer is to put yourself into that person's head and understand how you can position your "sell" so that he or she sees the benefit of what you want them to do – in this case carry your laundry product in their stores.

Small retailers can be a tough market to reach because their time is spent on their day-to-day business operations and they're not always focused on the next great new product. That said, all retailers want to build store traffic and increase profits. But, before you start pitching, you need to do your homework, plan your sales approach and get ready to deal with objections.

Reach the Right Person... at the Right Time.

Because you're dealing with a relatively small and specific market, you can take advantage of a highly personalized sales approach. If you haven't done so already, visit each of the stores and become familiar with products that are similar to yours. Look at who's shopping in these stores and the types of items they examine and buy. This visit is just to get familiar with the retailer. Do not attempt to sell during this "mission."

Next, identify who in the store is the primary decision-maker or the buyer. Call or visit at a time when the store is least likely to be busy and ask directly, "Who in the store makes the decisions about which products to carry?" "When is the best time to reach him or her?" "Does he or she have an email address or telephone number?" If you're lucky enough to reach the buyer on your first attempt, gauge whether you should launch into your pitch at that point or schedule an appointment to talk again. If the buyer seems rushed, you will not be able to do an effective selling job. I'm not a big fan of voice mail messages. If you can't get through, try calling on a different day or at a different time.

Toughen Up and Practice.

Role-play your sales pitch with some friends or colleagues and ask them to be as negative as possible. Come up with ready responses to obvious objections and questions like, "I don't do well with laundry products" and "Are they returnable if they don't sell?"

Get to Know the Buyer.

Call the buyer at a time when you think he or she will be able to really listen to you (based on your fact-finding work). Start by introducing yourself. "Hi. I was told by [name the person who gave you the contact information] that you're the right person to speak to. I'm Notoya Green, the president of The LaundrySpa, and I'd love to talk to you about a product that I think would do well in [store name.] Do you have a couple of minutes right now?" If they are busy, agree on a convenient time. A busy buyer might ask you to cut to the chase immediately. In this case, lead with a "grabber" benefit to him or her. For example, "I have a product that's going to be featured in national magazines and websites in May, and I was hoping your store would be one of the few in the area that's carrying it. I'll be happy to list your location on my website, so people know where to find it." You've immediately given him a reason to carry your product.

If, on the other hand, the buyer seems to have a few minutes to speak, launch into a well-planned introduction. The key is to establish a rapport so he doesn't view you as just another salesperson. Let him know that you're familiar with his store and that you believe it is an ideal location for your product. Explain how you've already had tremendous sales success, but are looking to expand distribution.

Save Your Valuable Marketing Dollars.

I wouldn't recommend giving away samples or costly marketing materials until you've gotten to know your prospect, but once you've done so, you should immediately offer to drop some off. Again, choose a time when you know they'll be there and you can establish some rapport. Follow up after you've delivered the sample. Be persistent, but not annoying. Be confident, but be prepared to face some rejection along the way.

Keep in Touch... the Selling Never Stops.

Once your product is in stores, check in periodically with the buyer to find out how it's selling. Send him copies of your press and keep him apprised of your efforts to boost product awareness. You should view this entire process not just as getting your product on the shelf, but as building a long-term relationship that could open doors for future products.

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