How to Stay in Touch with Prospects Who Aren’t Ready to Hire You (without Being a Pest)

Summary Handout

Introduction

Prospect follow-up is a severely underused force multiplier. It can yield disproportionate results for the time and effort required. But also happens to be an activity that most freelancers DON’T do.

When it’s used, it’s often used incorrectly, which leads to poor results—which in turn discourages many from using it further.

For our purposes, prospect follow-up can take two different forms:

1. Nurturing “not yet ready” prospects
2. Following up with “ready” prospects

“Not yet ready” (NYR) prospects are prospects who have indicated some level of interest (very mild to very strong) in your services but are not ready to engage with you yet.

“Ready” prospects are those who have indicated an interest in hiring you. They have a need and seem to be searching for a solution to that need.

The basic difference is this:

- Ready prospects need to get “sales” follow-up from you.
- NYR prospects need to get “nurturing” follow-up from you.
Here’s the entire process at a glance:

Staying in Touch with NYR Prospects

Much of the difference between just “getting by” and earning an executive-level income as a freelance professional lies in what you do with prospects who are not ready to hire you today.

I call it “lead nurturing.” And it quickly became a critical part of my marketing and sales process as a freelancer.

It Pays to Stay in Touch

- At any given time, only 3% of your market is actively buying, 40% is poised to begin and 56% is not ready (source: Vorsight).

- 44% of salespeople give up after one follow-up. Yet 80% of sales require five follow-ups (source: Scripted and The Marketing Donut).

- 80% of the prospects deemed “bad leads” by sales teams do go on to buy within 24 months (source: SiriusDecisions).

- On average, 15% to 20% of the “not yet ready to purchase” opportunities convert to sales [after lead nurturing] (source: Gleanster).

- Even inbound leads (inquiries) aren’t as ready to act as most of us think! 63% of people requesting information today about you and your services will not purchase for at least three months. And 20% will take more than 12 months to buy (source: Marketing Donut).
• Nurtured leads make 47% larger purchases than non-nurtured leads (source: The Annuitas Group).

• Lead-nurturing emails get four to 10 times the response rate compared with stand-alone email blasts (source: SilverPop/DemandGen Report).

Timing and Trust

Landing a new client requires both the right timing and a certain level of trust.

You can’t create urgency inside the prospect’s organization. But you can stay in touch until the timing is right!

You also can’t build trust overnight. It takes time, patience, and a sincere desire to establish a meaningful connection with your prospects. To do that effectively, you need a smart, methodical and sincere lead-nurturing effort with your NYR prospects.

The Lead-Nurturing Process for NYR Prospects

There are four components to an effective lead-nurturing strategy:

1. Library
2. Media
3. Frequency
4. Tracking and automation

#1: Information/Content Library

A huge factor in the success of your lead-nurturing efforts is adding value in every follow-up attempt. So you need good-quality content you can include in your follow-up messages.

What kind of content should you send? Here are some ideas:

Articles you’ve written. If you write a newsletter and have a few articles lying around from previous issues, move the best ones to your library. Relevant, insightful and well-written self-authored articles make excellent nurturing material. They give you credibility, position you as an expert on the topic, and provide your prospects with ideas and insights that could help them do their jobs better.
Does your newsletter count? Yes, but you also need a personalized nurturing “layer” on top of your newsletter. You need that one-to-one communication, whereas a newsletter is one-to-many.

**Reports or white papers** (or any other lead magnet you’ve created). This can be a powerful nurturing piece. Here again, reports and white papers give you credibility while offering value to readers.

Don’t have a report you can share? Not a problem! Try assembling one with previously published articles that touch on a common theme.

**Success stories.** Also known as “case studies” in marketing-speak, success stories are short articles that describe how you’ve helped a client solve a specific challenge and how the client specifically benefited from your service.

If you have one or two case studies already written, they can make fantastic nurturing material. If you don’t have any but have a few client successes that would make for a great story, this may be a good time to approach those clients.

**Third-party content.** Your nurturing content library doesn’t have to be completely self-authored. It’s better to have a good mix of self-authored content and third-party information.

Assemble a good list of interesting and relevant third-party content in the way of articles, blog posts, reports, white papers, success stories, reference material, survey results and statistics.

**Books.** If you work in a field in which each new client is worth thousands of dollars over the course of a year, you may want to consider adding books to your nurturing library. Pick books that are timely, relevant to the prospect, tied somehow to what you do and written by credible sources.

Books are memorable. After all, it’s not every day that a prospect gets a free book in the mail, especially one that’s relevant to their work.

**Videos and podcasts.** Whether it’s a video you’ve put together with some practical and relevant tips, or a podcast you came across that would be relevant and valuable to your audience, rich media can be a great way to stay in touch while adding value.

**Helpful tools.** If you come across helpful and practical tools, apps, utilities, software or websites that would help your leads do their jobs more easily, add them to your library. Become the person who brings those valuable ideas to your prospects’ attention. They won’t forget you!
News stories or general announcements. Interesting news announcements can work well. So do announcements about new things you’re doing.

For instance, if you’ve recently partnered with another freelancer to deliver a more complete service, draft a one-page document that describes the service, lists all the deliverables, explains what’s involved, describes your process or system, discusses the results clients can expect, and lists the advantages of using you instead of another provider.

Handwritten cards and other creative items. Get creative! Handwritten cards stand out in a world of electronic and mass-produced correspondence. The personal touch goes a long way toward staying top-of-mind with NYR prospects.

Where to find relevant information to add to your library:

- Industry publications, newsletters and blogs
- Google Alerts
- Pocket (www.getpocket.com)
- Crowdsourced content-curation platforms such as www.inbound.org

Where to keep your curated content:

- Physical file in your filing cabinet
- Evernote notebook for nurturing content
- Pocket

#2: Media

Using multiple media not only diversifies your efforts but also adds variety to your messages, which can help cut through the noise of junk mail and flooded email and voicemail inboxes.

There are three basic media you’ll want to use in a rotating fashion:

Postal mail. Keep it simple. Stuff your printed nurturing piece into either a standard #10 envelope or yellow oversize envelope (a 9x12 envelope works). Include either a sticky note or a cardstock note with a personalized handwritten message, such as this:
Hi John,

Came across this article recently. Thought you’d find it interesting.

Ed

Throw in your business card, handwrite the envelope and you’re good to go! Few people ever get mail like this anymore, so your piece will stand out.

Email. It’s efficient, recipients get emails right away and there’s usually no gatekeeper, so the chances of getting through to prospects can be higher than with postal mail. The downside is that it could get lost in the shuffle and never read.

Phone. Throw a few phone calls into your nurturing mix. The telephone is a very personal and interactive medium. It humanizes you.

You can use the phone as a single nurturing touch point. Or you can use it as part of a “one-two punch” strategy to let the prospect know that you just emailed them something and wanted to give them a heads-up.

Example of a good nurturing voicemail message:

Hi Jill.

Ed Gandia here. I’m the business-to-business copywriter you contacted back in December. I’m calling because I’ve recently worked with two clients to turn some of their white papers into one-sheet summaries for their sales teams.

This concept has really caught on with these two clients, and I thought it might be something you’d be interested in exploring.

If you’d like to connect, you can reach me at 770-555-1876 or ed@abcxyz.com.

Take care.

Keep it simple, relaxed, to the point and sincere. And notice that even though it’s obviously promotional in nature, there’s value in there. It’s not your typical “Hey, do you have anything for me?” message.
#3: Frequency

Remember: 44% of salespeople give up after one follow-up. Yet 80% of sales require five follow-ups (source: Scripted and The Marketing Donut).

That doesn’t mean you call or email five times with an “Are you ready for me?” message. Five or more attempts means you stay in touch in a relevant and personalized way over a period of time.

The frequency and nature of your follow-up depends on:

- Stage of the sales cycle
- Who contacted whom
- Prospect’s responsiveness and cues

Use these three factors to guide your decisions. But in general, sending something every one to three months is about right. Adjust that frequency up or down based on these three factors.

#4: Tracking and Automation

A simple spreadsheet will do when starting out. Add a prospect per row and use a column to track what you sent that prospect (and when).

Once this activity becomes a habit, consider implementing a contact management system. Here are some popular options:

- Highrisehq.com
- Contactually.com
- Zoho.com/crm
- HubSpot’s CRM (this one is free!)

Resist the temptation to automate this process with emails or services such as “SendOutCards.” Remember: The personal touch is one of the factors that helps you stand out with your follow-up!

Finally, know that 80% compliance with this process is better than not starting your nurturing initiative because you want to get everything “just right.” Don’t wait to act until you have it down perfectly. Think “ready, fire, aim.”
How and When to Follow up with “Ready” and “Not yet Ready” Prospects

How do you follow up? What type of follow-up do you use? How much follow-up do you do? It all depends on the three factors mentioned earlier:

1. Stage of the sales cycle
2. Who contacted whom
3. Prospect’s responsiveness and cues

#1: Stage of the Sales Cycle

**Stage One: Prospecting.** Your goal is to get interest. This type of follow-up is not nurturing follow-up or sales follow-up. It’s simply prospecting follow-up. But you should have some sort of protocol on how, when and how many times you plan to follow up with cold prospects.
**Stage Two: NYR Prospects.** Your goal is to start a conversation. As you move further into the sales cycle, they are no longer “cold” prospects. They’ve indicated some level of interest, which means that you’ve earned the “right” to nurture them.

*Get a Conversation*

In these early stages of the sales cycle (prospecting and NYR), persistence is NOT always the biggest variable. You do need a certain amount of persistence. But there is a point where it starts working against you. The trick is to find the sweet spot.

**Stage Three: “Ready” Prospects.** Your goal here is to land a project. You’re now in the later stages of the sales cycle. At this point, you’ve earned the right to increase the amount of follow-up because the prospect has taken a series of actions that justify that kind of follow-up.

Also, this is no longer “nurturing” follow-up. It’s “sales” follow-up.
#2: Who Contacted Whom

The next factor to consider is who contacted whom. Generally speaking, when the prospect was the one who reached out, that gives you more leeway as far as follow-up frequency and intensity.

#3: Prospect’s Responsiveness and Cues

Finally, you need to take into account other miscellaneous information such as what they've shared with you in their communications, their motivations, urgency, timing, etc. Use this intelligence and clues to guide your follow-up decisions.

How Often (and How Much) Should You Follow up with Unresponsive “Ready” Prospects?

Here's a baseline sequence and frequency to consider:

1. Email the day after sending fee agreement.
2. Email three business days after that, if no response.
3. Call five business days after that, if no response.

4. Email five business days after that, if no response.

5. Call five business days after that, if no response (final attempt).

6. Add them to your nurturing bucket, if no response.

You should obviously adjust this based on what the prospect told you about their decision time frame.

Sample script for last attempt (#5 above):

_HI Tina. Ed Gandia here, following up on that data center white paper project. Hey, I don’t want to be a pest about this, but I figured I’d try you just one more time and see if it’s just a timing issue on your side. I’m scheduling for April already and was hoping to fit this in before things got too hectic. If I don’t hear back in the next couple of days, I’ll just assume this project just didn’t pan out. And that’s fine. But if you don’t mind, can you shoot me over a note sometime and just let me know what ended up happening? I’d be curious to know if the issue was on my end. Either way, thanks for reaching out, Tina. I’ll stay in touch every couple of months. But if you ever need anything, feel free to reach out. I’d love to reconnect at some point and see if there’s an opportunity for us to work together in the future._"

**Practical Tips for Getting It Done!**

Tips and recommendations:

1. Treat this like a project.

2. Create and follow “sequence” rules. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Action/Deliverable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Month 1</td>
<td>Mail article of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month 3</td>
<td>Touch base with a phone call/voicemail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month 5</td>
<td>Email URL of results from an industry survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month 7</td>
<td>Mail client success story with a personal note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month 9</td>
<td>Touch base with a phone call/voicemail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month 11</td>
<td>Mail report or white paper with a sticky note attached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month 13</td>
<td>Email URL of helpful checklist or self-assessment quiz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month 15</td>
<td>Call to invite them to download a podcast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month 17</td>
<td>Mail article of interest with a personal note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month 19</td>
<td>Email URL of a relevant online video</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Use your CRM or spreadsheet and “tag” prospects you need to nurture as “nurturing” (or put them in the “nurturing” bucket of your CRM system).

4. Use Boomerang and other similar tools if you feel it would truly help you.

5. Organize your days around “themes.” For example, have a day where the only marketing activity you have on your schedule is follow-up.

6. Avoid trying to do too much at once. You might schedule just 30 minutes a week to start.

7. Watch your mindset: Don’t treat lead nurturing as a desperate attempt to convert a prospect to a client. Let go of any expectations and instead focus on sending relevant and personalized messages. Detaching yourself from a specific outcome is key.

8. Be a human: Connect with NYR and Ready prospects in social media (LinkedIn and Facebook). And don’t be all business all the time. Humanize yourself by posting updates about your life and what you’re up to.

A challenge for you: Take one simple action today!

For example:

- Find and list five recent NYR prospects you can start nurturing.
- Set up a free account with Pocket and start looking for content you can clip for your content library.
- Designate a day of the week for nurturing/follow-up activities.

Whatever it is, start TODAY with something simple. The key is to turn this into a habit. And habits are born from simple, consistent actions.