

# Pulling Out All the Stops

Careful detective work – along with creativity and persistence – can unearth new information about customers with past-due balances. **BY ALEX ROSEN**

**A**chieving better results from fewer available resources is a growing necessity for credit and collections managers. This requires more creativity as we locate and investigate customers with past-due balances (an activity sometimes referred to as skip-tracing).

When collection efforts are exhausted with a customer's accounts payables' contact, there are still many actions that can turn the situation around.

First, it is absolutely critical that you organize and summarize the transaction and customer information in the customer file. In that way, you can build a solid, uniform foundation from the previous work completed.

Review any underlying credit application, insertion order, client communication and notes within the file to learn as much as possible about the transaction and the customer. What is the transaction at issue? What services were ordered and what were provided? What is the reason for nonpayment? What is the customer's business? What is their contact information?

Have the right mindset: this receivable situation is now escalated. Incite urgency and get to the decision maker. Demand to speak with the owner and, if necessary, go down the leadership hierarchy from there (COO, CFO, manager, etc.).

Keep in mind the slogan "one connect, one collect." In other words, seek to extract payment, or a commitment for payment, during your first telephone conversation with the decision maker. If immediate payment in full is not possible, get a good faith upfront payment during the call.

During any collection conversation, ask open-ended questions and, most importantly, actively listen. It is just as important to note *how* someone provides information as it is to understand *what* he or she is actually saying.

We want the other person to do most of the talking. This allows us to constantly investigate, learn why the invoice remains unpaid and define future payment expectations. In the process, attempt to extract any contact information that is not already in the customer file. This may be your only opportunity to speak with this individual, or anyone at all, and this detail may determine whether you collect the unpaid balance.

If you can't immediately find the company's owner or decision maker, there are many free resources available on the Internet that can help you do so.

Most states allow you to complete a corporate entity search through their Secretary of State website. There is a simple way to quickly find this information. On a search engine, type in the name of the state where the customer is located and

"Secretary of State Business Search."

Search engines can also help you extract additional contact information and provide insight into the customer's operating status. Look at the customer's website and social media pages and compare the information displayed on those pages with the information described in your customer file. When was the customer's most recent post? Who posts? Who typically comments or likes these posts?

A few other free websites could provide additional, beneficial information:

- Manta provides the owner's name.
- Google Earth shows the business location

on a map or street view.

- GoDaddy WHOIS discloses information about the person that registered the company website: his or her name and contact information.

If your company can pull credit reports, they could provide invaluable information about the delinquent customer. (For information about BCCA's latest credit report, Media Whys, please see page 9.)

What's more, many counties provide free online court records to the public. They can help you determine if the company or owner are, or were, involved in any pending state court cases. For a fee, you can also view and download federal court and bankruptcy records through PACER.

The recorder of deeds office can help ascertain the deed holder and/or mortgagee of the property address associated with your customer. If the customer is unresponsive, perhaps the customer's landlord can be of assistance.

Lastly, for a fee, through LexisNexis Accurint, you can obtain extremely up-to-date contact information for a person and his or her relatives, the mortgagee of a specific parcel of land and information about a business, amongst many other items.

Once you complete your collection efforts, provide your company's leadership with a summary of the delinquent receivable situation and include specific facts about the transaction, the customer and the information unearthed during your collection efforts.

If possible, in a discrete manner, show the outside-of-the-box tasks completed. Your superior job performance just might astonish leadership.



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MARCH/APRIL 2017

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