

## A Few Thoughts On The Difference Between Selling And Servicing

I did a little informal telephone survey the other day, asking half a dozen quick/digital/small commercial printers to tell me what they want their outside salespeople to accomplish. The answers were pretty consistent, with “bring in new customers” and “increase the business we’re doing with current customers” in the first and second positions in terms of importance.

Next, I called half a dozen outside salespeople and asked them to tell me what they considered to be their most important responsibilities. Again, the answers were pretty consistent—at least among the salespeople—but they were not especially consistent with what the printshop owners had in mind. The salespeople put “take care of my current customers” and “prospect for new customers” in the first and second positions on their lists.

If you ask me, this difference in perspective explains a lot of the problem the quick printing industry seems to have with outside sales. Far too many quick/digital/small commercial printers let their salespeople operate according to their own perspective. The result is usually a focus on “service” and a lack of “selling,” with most salespeople reporting that they’re too busy taking care of their current customers to do any significant prospecting or business development.

### Real Priorities

Obviously, it is important to take good care of current customers, but I think most salespeople take it to extremes. They’ll drop whatever they’re doing to provide “exceptional service” to any customer...even the ones who aren’t very good customers! I recently spoke with a young salesperson who told me she’d spent the entire previous day “researching” a quote on pocket folders, only to be told by her boss at the end of the day that he didn’t even want to quote the job until the customer in question paid the long-overdue invoice for his last order.

(By the way, that story raised several immediate questions and concerns for me. First, why didn’t this salesperson know that her customer’s account was overdue? Second, why didn’t the owner notice that his salesperson had spent an entire day in the shop? And third, how could it possibly have taken an entire day to “research” a quote for 1000 3-color pocket folders? I’ll come back to those questions in a moment.)

I tell the salespeople I work with that their priorities should be pretty clear. First, they should do whatever it takes to provide the required level of service to their *current, important* customers (with “required” defined as meeting or modestly exceeding their needs—not dropping everything to do something right now that doesn’t have to be done until next week, or spending an hour doing something that could be handled just as well in five minutes—and “important” defining people/companies who buy a significant volume of the exact type of printing/copying you want to sell at profitable prices and pay within acceptable terms.) The second priority is to prospect and develop people/companies who might qualify as *new, important* customers. The third priority is to provide the best level of service possible—considering the time and other resources still available after taking care of the first and second priorities—to *current, not-so-important* customers.

I think the evidence is pretty clearly that most quick/digital/small commercial printing salespeople simply don’t understand these priorities, and the results are predictable.

### Questions And Concerns

Before we go any farther, let’s get back to the three questions and concerns I felt after hearing the story of the young salesperson and the pocket folders. First, why didn’t this salesperson know that her customer’s account was overdue? This is the sort of information a salesperson should be provided with on a regular basis. Of course, I talk with salespeople every week who don’t even get regular reports on their own sales volume, so I guess I can’t be surprised that information like this isn’t shared. I hope you’ll agree, though, that it has some bearing on the way a salesperson should be doing his/her job. One of these days, I’ll write a column about the information you should share with/provide to a salesperson on a regular basis.

My second question was why the owner didn’t notice that his salesperson had spent an entire day in the shop? I agree that you shouldn’t have to watch a salesperson every minute of every day, but shouldn’t you notice something as “out-of-the-ordinary” as this? (If it’s not “out-of-the-ordinary” for your outside salesperson to be in the shop for an entire day, you might want to give me a call. You probably have some problems with that salesperson!) The best way to avoid this situation is to meet with your salesperson every morning—just a 5-10 minute meeting where you go over the salesperson’s plan for the day. Make sure you understand how the salesperson expects to spend his/her day, and make especially sure that you point out activities that conflict with your priorities! If my salesperson told me that he/she planned to do some research on a quote for pocket folders, I would ask these questions: Who is the customer

or prospect? Who do you plan to call for this quote? How long do you expect all of this to take? Are you sure that much time is justified in terms of our priorities?

Do you see how this sort of conversation might have changed the way another printer's young salesperson spent her day? Don't ever lose sight of the fact that every salesperson needs management and direction...especially the kind of young, relatively inexperienced people who make up the majority of this industry's salesforce. They don't know how to do the job properly, and someone has to explain it to them—and then hold them accountable for performance!

My third question was how could it possibly have taken an entire day to “research” an order for 1000 3-color pocket folders? The young salesperson told me that she called eight suppliers to get quotes, and just about every one of them had questions she wasn't able to answer without going back to her notes or getting back to the prospect. She told me that she was calling and faxing back and forth all day.

“What were you hoping to accomplish by calling eight suppliers?” I asked her.

“I wanted to make sure that I got the lowest price,” she said.

“Why?” I asked.

“So I'd get the order,” she said.

“Is that your strategy,” I asked, “to sell on the basis of price?”

“No, of course not,” she said. “We sell service and quality.”

### **What Do You Think?**

I'll leave it up to you to decide if this salesperson has her strategic head on straight and tight. I'd rather spend a minute telling you the right way—the most efficient way—to handle a situation like this. First, select one reputable source for the product or service you're looking for. Next, call them and ask them to fax you or e-mail you one of their order-entry forms, with the critical information you have to provide highlighted or indicated in some other way. Next, get all of that information together and get it back to the supplier, and when you do that, ask them this question: “Can you assure me that this job is a good fit for your equipment, so I can be assured of a competitive price?” If the answer is “yes,” take the price they give you, mark it up by at least 50% to make sure that you'll make a solid profit on the job, and present that price to the customer. The total worktime involved in this entire process should be no more than 30 minutes. (And the whole process should take even less time the next time, after gaining some experience with the product and the supplier.)

To reinforce this idea, let me tell you a quick story about a business forms broker I worked with a few years ago. Bobby was an ex-Moore salesperson, and he told me that he was very excited when he first started out on his own, mostly because he'd get to keep all of the profit from his sales, not just a portion of them paid as commissions. Like a typical broker, he bid every job among a number of suppliers, looking for the best price.

“Before long,” Bobby told me, “I realized that I was spending half of my time as a buyer, and that was neither what I wanted to do or what I'm good at. By that time, I had an idea which suppliers I could trust for quality and to meet my customers' deadlines, so I decided to work with just one supplier for each category of work, and I didn't worry about whether they were giving me the lowest price in the market because I knew that my best customers bought from me because they trusted me, not because I had the lowest prices in town.”

Bobby clearly understood the benefits of relationship selling. He accepted the fact that there were orders he'd never get and people he'd never sell to if the buying decision was based strictly on price. But he didn't care, because his overall business plan was based on identifying and developing “good” customers. “My ‘buying’ strategy gave me a lot more time for selling,” he told me, “and I turned that time into a lot of money.”

### **Interesting Reaction**

I told that story to the young salesperson mentioned earlier and she had an interesting reaction. “I think I understand what you're saying,” she said, “but I also think that part of the service I provide is to find my customers the lowest prices on anything we can't produce in-house.”

“OK,” I said, “but tell me this...do you also think it's part of the service you provide to give your customers the lowest possible prices on work that you do produce in-house?”

“No,” she said, “but that's different.”

“How?” I asked.

“Because,” she said, “when we produce something in-house, we have a lot more control over it, so we're able to charge more.”

I don't know about you, folks, but that sounds sort of backwards to me. But please understand that I'm not repeating my conversations with this young salesperson to amuse you, or to make fun of her. The point I'm trying to drive home is that this is how many/most young printing salespeople think, unless they're trained otherwise!

## **Comfort Zone**

It's obvious to me that most quick/digital/small commercial printing salespeople think "service" is their job, not "selling." And it's no surprise to me that most of the printers I talk to are less than satisfied with the performance of their salespeople. The bottom line here is that if you don't create a focus on "selling," you're going to end up with a majority of time spent on "service."

Why? Simply because "servicing" is more comfortable than "selling." Think about it! When a salesperson drives out to pick up an order or deliver a proof, he/she can usually count on hearing the words "thank you!" You almost always get some positive feedback when you're out "servicing" current customers.

On the other hand, when a salesperson is out prospecting, he/she can usually count on hearing the word "no!"—or running into all sorts of other negative feedback. The truth is that it's hard for many salespeople to deal with all of that rejection.

My advice to those salespeople is to adjust their expectations. You can't sell to everyone, I tell them, but there are two other factors to be considered in setting your expectations. First, a quick printing salesperson is unlikely to ever run out of prospects; most quick printing salespeople have hundreds—if not thousands—of viable prospects in their marketing area. Second, you don't have to sell to everyone. The truth is that it takes relatively few successes to make a good living as a quick/digital/small commercial printing salesperson. I looked at a group of the "solid performers" among my sales coaching clients recently, and noted that they're each handling between \$300,000 - \$450,000 in annual sales volume and dealing with 40-50 customers. You can accept a lot of "no's" when all it takes to make a good living is 40-50 "yes's!"

The key, though, is to be out there selling...to go out there where the "no's" live and turn some of them into "yes's"—and into money!