

A “Hidden” Sales & Marketing Asset

I’m a strong believer in taking advantage of every sales and marketing asset. Here’s one you may not have thought about recently...your shop itself! The building in which your company does business can be a significant sales and marketing asset, in four separate but inter-related ways.

The first opportunity may be the most obvious one. Your building provides a platform for signage that identifies the company inside. The attention-getting and advertising value of signage is certainly something that retail-oriented quick printers understand, but the same opportunity applies to at least some degree to larger and more commercially-oriented quick printers. If part of your advertising philosophy has always been to “keep your name out in front of” current and potential customers, a highly visible sign on the roof, wall, or front lawn of your building can do just that. And when you look at signage as a marketing investment, the decision to increase the size of the sign, include your logo and corporate colors, and consider lighting it take on a whole new importance.

I once worked for a company called Spectra Graphics, located outside of Philadelphia, about 100 yards back from the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The plant was not visible from the highway, but a neon sign mounted on the roof certainly was. The bright neon sign was a borderline eyesore, but it was a marketing asset, because our salespeople would regularly call on new prospects who would say, “Sure, I know who you are, I see your sign all the time.” Name recognition is a significant marketing advantage, especially in the early stages of selling. Give some thought to how a change in your current signage might help you accomplish that.

Selling Site

The second opportunity is to use your building as a meeting and selling site. Again, this is something that the retail-oriented quick printers understand. When you get them into your shop, it’s a lot easier to sell to them!

But again, this is an opportunity that has applications for commercially-oriented quick printers, and it’s an opportunity that many of the largest commercial printers already try to take advantage of. Bringing a prospect or customer in for a “plant tour” is hardly a new concept. But I’ve heard of—and been on!—plant tours that did the printer considerably more harm than good; when a visit to the production area showed the printing company to be sloppy, disorganized, and lacking in professionalism.

The subject of “plant tours” came up in a seminar recently, and I asked the group of salespeople I was working with to tell me just what their purpose would be in bringing customers or prospects into the shop. For the most part, the answers ran toward “showing them how big our shop is; showing them how much equipment we have; and introducing them to the ‘ heavies ’ in our company.”

In my opinion, all of that has value, but it doesn’t address the most important considerations of the buying decision. People don’t buy from you because you’re big, or because you have more equipment than any other printer. They buy from you because they believe they can trust you to get their work done right! If they see things in your plant that would put any doubt into their minds, you’ve hurt yourself with a plant tour, not helped yourself.

The most impressive plant tour I ever went on was to a medium-sized commercial printing company in Western New York. This was at a time when I was managing the Marketing Services department within a division of Moore Business Forms, and I was buying printing rather than selling it. This company had two Heidelberg presses, and they had built a separate room around each press inside of their building.

The walls of these rooms were white—and clean. The floors were a light shade of grey—and clean. The presses looked almost new...and I was shocked to find out that this plant and its equipment were nearly nine years old. Everything else in the plant, from paper storage to the bindery equipment, reflected the same level of professional pride and care. Now I ask you, do you think you could trust these people to deliver a quality print job? I think the company’s consistent growth and profitability provides evidence that their customers and prospects thought they could! And I think the same sort of opportunity is available to quick printers. You may not build a separate room for each of your presses, but you can certainly keep the room they’re in clean and organized.

There is obviously a cost involved in maintaining a “critically clean” working environment. But in this particular company, they don’t think of it as a production cost. They think of it as a marketing investment, and that investment has paid big dividends over the years for this company.

Normal Clutter

A clean and well-maintained work area is a big part of what it takes to make plant or shop tours truly effective as an element of marketing strategy. I’m willing to bet that your shop has grown cluttered—maybe even dirty!—and that it’s happened so gradually that the current state of your shop just looks “normal.” If you’re going to let customers

and prospects see where you work—especially as part of the selling process—I would strongly urge you to consider a marketing investment in cleaning up the mess and keeping it clean and organized!

Even if you have no wish to have customers see where you work, there are two more marketing asset opportunities in having a clean and well-organized shop that runs on professional pride. The first is that a clean and well-organized shop is likely to be a more productive shop. A more productive shop simply costs less to operate, and that can be reflected in your prices.

Please don't misunderstand this: I'm not urging you to adopt a low-price strategy! But I do want you to think about the benefits of being a low-cost supplier. If you can produce any particular category of printing for less than your competitors, you are positioned to make either of two very positive strategic marketing choices. You can compete at established price levels and get your share of the business, with the knowledge that it's better (read that more profitable) business for you than for your higher-cost competitors. I think it's a fair assumption that this strategy would have you operating on the higher end of "acceptable" profit margins.

Or, you can reduce your prices toward the lower end of "acceptable" margins, and expect to gain some orders that you wouldn't otherwise be getting. The key word, of course, is "acceptable" and you have to decide exactly what range that covers. But I think it's fair to say that both situations—the orders you get at highly acceptable margins, and the orders you take away from competitors at lower (but still acceptable!) profit margins—represent positive marketing strategy. A more productive plant that allows you to operate as a lower-cost supplier provides you with a significant marketing opportunity. And in blunt terms, anything that strengthens your company and/or weakens a competitor is probably worth looking at.

Workplace Issues

The fourth opportunity for your shop or plant to function as a marketing asset hinges on your ability to operate it as a safe and happy workplace. This may seem a little bit "touchy-feely" to many hard-nosed quick printers, but the truth of the matter is that happy employees almost always perform better at their jobs.

Now, how does this apply to your company's marketing? Because in the best run companies in the printing industry, it's clearly understood that everybody sells! That doesn't mean that every employee has contact with customers, but it does mean that every employee has a role to play in the process of creating—and keeping—happy customers. Think of it this way: every employee in your company is either a promise-maker or a promise-keeper.

Your salespeople are your company's primary promise-makers, and all of those promises they make—and/or your promotional literature makes—might be thought of as the front-end of your marketing efforts. Those promises range from basic considerations like quality and meeting specific delivery dates to more subtle concerns like "looking out" for potential problems and making sure that a client looks as good as possible on paper.

The process of keeping all of those promises is the back-end of your marketing efforts. What I hope you'll appreciate in looking at the "big picture" of your marketing effort is that when the promises are first believed, you get orders from first-time customers; when the promises are kept, you get re-orders and continuing customer relationships.

With that in mind, anything you can do to make it more likely that all of the promises will be kept becomes part of your marketing strategy. Many printers have found that improvements in the physical working environment can produce dramatic improvements in morale and, as a result, in overall employee performance.

Would you like a few examples? A printing company in Massachusetts "invested" \$8000 in refurbishing the employee break room. Six months later, the company's "reject rate" is at an all-time low, and its "on-time delivery" rate is at an all-time high. A company in Minnesota paved its employee parking area. The rate of absenteeism has been down significantly ever since, especially on wet and messy days. A company in California turned an unused office into an employee day-care center. Again, the rate of absenteeism has been down ever since the change was made in the working environment, and a recent telephone survey shows the highest levels of customer satisfaction in the last 15 years. "We were always struggling to make deliveries, and we were missing most of them because we were always short-handed," noted the owner of that shop. "Now we have no trouble keeping up with more business because our people come to work every day."

Bottom Line

When you ask quick printers about any opportunities they see to improve their marketing, most will tell you about their plans to hire new salespeople, or to develop a new capabilities list or promotional brochure. I hope I've been able to introduce you to what may have been a "hidden" marketing asset. With a little bit of thought and planning, the building in which your company operates can be a significant sales and marketing asset.