

A Quick Printer's Manifesto

Philip Roth has a book on the best-seller lists titled "I Married A Communist." I haven't read it, but I do love the title. Like most of my fellow aging baby-boomers, I remember when the idea of a Communist anywhere in our midst was cause for great alarm. They were the enemy, after all. They spied on us, they threatened to destroy us with nuclear weapons, and they cheated at basketball. (Munich, 1972!) You certainly wouldn't want your brother or sister to marry one!

History will show that Communism didn't work very well in the 20th Century, but in all fairness, there's quite a bit of difference between Communist government as it evolved in the USSR and the "working-class utopia" first presented by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848.

Now, what does any of that have to do with quick printing? I'm not promoting Communism in any form—especially in the management of a printing business!—but I think it's a pretty good idea for every quick printer to develop his/her own "manifesto." Why? Because if you do it right, you'll equip yourself and your employees with an invaluable marketing tool.

Declaration Of...

The dictionary defines *manifesto* as a declaration or proclamation, but that may be too limited a definition for our purposes. Consider this: Marx and Engels created a document that clearly defined a complex social/political movement and made the whole thing sound attractive to a significant number of people. The real success of *The Communist Manifesto* was its ability to tell the people of the world (1) what Communism was, and (2) why they should convert to it.

When you put that in modern business terms, the object—and opportunity—of a quick printer's *manifesto* is to tell your prospects (1) who you are, and (2) why they should buy from you.

Who You Are

Another book I haven't read yet—and probably should, considering my cholesterol level—is titled: "You Are What You Eat." For our purposes in creating your *manifesto*, I think it's appropriate to start with the understanding that "You Are What You Sell."

Yes, you're probably a Locally-Owned Business, and maybe even a Minority-Owned one. You might also be a Member of PrintImage International, and/or a part of an International Franchise Organization. You almost certainly provide High Quality along with Fast, Friendly Service and Reasonable Prices.

These are identifying factors, sure, but the most sophisticated marketers know that none of them really define "who you are" in terms of a *manifesto*. Ultimately, these factors have to provide the reasons why people should buy from you. The first issue, though, is to tell people what you sell!

Think of it this way: effectively communicating "who you are/what you sell" gets you into the competition for any prospect's business. From that point on, you have to convince each prospect to buy "it" from you, rather than from any other supplier.

"It" in this case refers to anything they might need which fits into your "product line." It's this product line that really defines "who you are."

Printers' Products

The best place to see printers placing their "product lines" on display is in the Yellow Pages, and I'm pleased to report that the printers advertising my local Yellow Pages have done a pretty good job in telling people who they are/what they sell. The best-of-the-bunch lists the following product line: Design & Layout, High Volume Copying, Multicolor Printing, Digital Color Output, Binding Services, Color Copies, Flyers, Brochures, Letterhead, Newsletters, Tabs, Oversized Copies, Business Cards, Poster Size Color Prints and Docutech Digital Copying.

To me, the order in which these "products" are listed is significant. First, the ad tells me, this printer can help me to design "it," and then produce as many as I need, either by copying—which most people will assume means black-and-white—or by multicolor printing. If I know what Digital Color Output means in the first place, the ad also tells me that I can bring in my disk. (If I don't know what Digital Color Output means, no harm is done.) Next, the ad tells me that this printshop can handle a variety of binding options, and in case I'm still confused about whether they do the type of printing I need, they next make it clear that I can ask them about color copies, flyers, brochures, letterhead, newsletters, etc. At the very end of the product listing are Poster Size Color Prints and

Docutech Digital Copying, probably the most sophisticated applications in the quick/small commercial printing marketplace.

I think this product listing follows a very logical progression, and I think it does a very, very good job of telling potential customers what kind of printing/copying this company can handle. The real lesson here is that when you effectively communicate who you are/what you sell, you increase the chances of connecting with prospects who have need of any of the elements of your “product line.”

Conversely, if you don’t communicate who you are/what you sell effectively, you decrease the likelihood of getting any shot at their business. To give you an example of a likely mis-communication, another printer advertising in my local Yellow Pages used the term “in-house graphics” near the top of his/her ad. As an industry insider, I think I know what he/she was trying to communicate, but wouldn’t you agree that “design & layout” is far less ambiguous than “in-house graphics?” If a prospect makes the connection, there’s no harm/no foul. But if a business prospect looks at that term and says: “Oh, they do graphics in people’s houses,” the chances are pretty good that the prospect will keep looking until he/she finds what looks like a business printer.

The “Why” Factor

Establishing your “product line” is only half of the sales/marketing battle. In fact, it’s probably far less than half! As noted earlier, the next issue is to convince each prospect to buy “it” from you, rather than from any other supplier.

The Yellow Pages provides a perfect example of the importance of this issue. Most of the printers advertising in my local Yellow Pages have done a pretty good job of telling me who they are/what they do, but that still doesn’t do much to differentiate all of those printers from each other. I think most quick printers would agree that even a good Yellow Pages ad brings in more inquiries than orders. Once the Yellow Pages—or any other marketing/advertising media—does its job, you still face the challenge of converting the inquiry into an order.

So, why should I buy “it” from you as opposed to any of your competitors. What makes you different? What makes you better? Do you see that the “why” factor is really the key to effective marketing?

No Difference?

An attendee at one of my seminars told me recently that there isn’t much difference between his printshop and the four or five others he considers to be his main competitors. “We all have the same basic equipment and the same basic capabilities,” he said. “We all produce good quality, and we all meet the same kind of delivery deadlines for our customers. I think it’s turned into just a matter of do good work and you’ll get your share of the business.”

I told him that I couldn’t argue with the first part of his statement, but I didn’t agree at all with his conclusion. The truth is that there are untold thousands of cases in business where individual companies own a dominant share of their marketplace, even though there isn’t much that truly differentiates them from their competitors in terms of product line, quality, service or price. Sometimes, I told him, the only real differentiating factor is that the dominant company worked harder than anyone else did to tell its story.

Beyond that, I told him, your company *is* better than its competitors. “You may not think the differences are there,” I said, “but your customers do. They’ve made the decision to buy from you instead of any of the other guys, and they’ve done that for a reason!”

Crux Of The Matter

Now we come to the crux of the matter. Once you clearly understand who you are/what you sell and why your current customers buy from you, you have all of the elements in place to complete your *manifesto*. And once you’ve done that, your *manifesto* becomes the core of your marketing program. You use it as a tool to help you duplicate the success you’ve had with your current customers. You use it to work harder than anyone else to tell your story!

How do you gain the input you need from your current customers? It’s really a pretty straightforward process, but it *doesn’t* start out by asking them: “Why do you buy from us?” As many inexperienced marketers have learned, when you ask too general a question, you often get too general an answer!

A much better strategy is to sit down and consider the question yourself first. Make a list of the reasons *you think* people buy from you; of all of the factors you think they consider important. And be specific! Don’t write: “They buy from us because of our service.” Take it further to identify specific service issues. For example: “They buy from us because we always answer the telephone on the first or second ring; They buy from us because we don’t tell them one thing and then do another; They buy from us because we always call after a delivery is made to make sure they have what they need.”

Once you've completed this part of the process, I recommend that you share your opinions with your staff. "Here's why I think our customers buy from us," you might say, "what do you think? Do I have it right?" (By the way, don't lose sight of the important reality that all you have here are opinions. Your employees' input serves to either confirm or to challenge your own opinions; none of this becomes *fact* until the customers in question agrees that it's all true.)

Getting your employees involved in this process is a good idea for a number of reasons. First of all, it promotes teamwork along with individual responsibility. Second—and perhaps more importantly—employees often know more about day-to-day, project-to-project dealings with customers than the owner does. You might think a customer buys from you because you always call to check their inventory levels. One of your employees might tell you: "But we haven't done that with them for a long time!" It wouldn't be the first—or the last—time a printshop owner wasn't fully "up to speed" on the goings-on in his/her own operation!

Customer Confirmation

The end product of the "internal" part of this process should be a written statement: We believe that our best customers—of whom you are one—do business with us *because...* followed by as many "bullet points" as it takes to tell your story. The next step is to put this written statement in front of your best customers, and use it as the foundation for a conversation that will flesh out your understanding of the reasons that people do business with your company. "This is what we think," you tell them. "Do you agree? And what else can you add to our understanding of why you like doing business with us?"

A word of advice: Please don't try to do this by fax or mail! This should be a personal, face-to-face conversation. First of all, because doing it that way demonstrates the respect you hold for your best customers. Second, because you can expect people to answer in much greater detail in a conversation (as opposed to asking your customers to write down their answers on a "survey" form.)

Another word of advice: Don't expect all of your customers to say "Yes, that's exactly why we buy from you!" In my experience, it's a very rare quick printer who really understands the dynamics of his/her customers' decision-making process. I'm betting that they will surprise you...and in most cases, that's good! Remember, the idea here is not just to confirm what you already thought; it's to make sure that you completely understand all that you have going for you!

Re-Write And Assembly

The final parts of the process are to re-write the statement you brought to your best customers—incorporating their thoughts into your internal "opinions"—and then assemble the revised statement and your "product line" listing into a single document.

If I were putting it together for you, the first section would consist of the headline: "This is what we sell"—followed by a bullet-point listing of your "product line. The second section would begin with another headline: "Our best customers tell us that they have chosen us to handle their printing/copying because..." This headline would be followed by the bullet-points from your revised "statement."

Now, what you have is a quick printer's *manifesto*, a statement or proclamation that can be used to tell prospects (1) what you sell, and (2) why they should do business with you. As I said earlier, this *manifesto* can now serve as the core of your sales/marketing efforts. You can design a direct mail piece—or even a Yellow Pages ad—around it. You salespeople can use it as their primary piece of collateral literature. You can even add a list of your best customers to your *manifesto*, taking full advantage of the testimonial value of those relationships.

Selling—growing your business—is a challenge, there's no doubt about that, but if you think about it, the basic nature of the printing sales challenge is pretty simple. The "need" for printing is widespread, so you don't have to convince most people that they need what you sell. You do have to establish the match between their "need" and your "product line," but that's usually the easy part. The real challenge, many would say, is the part about getting them to buy "it" from you.

My advice is to figure out why your current customers buy from you, consolidate that knowledge in the form of a *manifesto*, and then use your *manifesto* to duplicate your previous success.