

Business Building Questions

One of my recurring themes over the years has been that a “typical” quick/digital/small commercial printer only has two ways to grow. One way is to gain new customers. The other is to sell more products and/or services to current customers. Of those two avenues for growth, which is likely to be easier to accomplish?

If you’re at all “typical” of the printers I work with, you answered that it should be easier to sell more of your products and services to your current customers.

Here’s another theme to consider. I’ve challenged many of you over the last few years with the statement that a “typical” quick/digital/small commercial printer has all of the customers he/she needs *right now* to double the company’s sales volume. When I make that statement in seminars, most of the printers in attendance move their heads up and down, indicating their agreement.

Even the ones who don’t nod their heads at “double” usually agree that they have a significant opportunity to increase business with current customers. I don’t know about you, but I’d be happy enough with an opportunity to increase my sales volume by a half, a third, or even 10-15% without having to go through the more difficult challenges of developing brand new customers.

Another Related Theme

Now here’s a third idea for your consideration. Within the opportunity to sell more to your current customers, there are only two possibilities. One is to sell them more of what they’re already buying from you. The other is to sell them completely new products and/or services. Which of those is likely to be easier?

The answer is that it’s easier to “sell” them more of what they’re already buying from you, and many printers have enjoyed substantial growth with individual customers as their usage of various products and/or services increased. The reality, though, is that when this happens, it’s often not the result of a pro-active selling effort. More often, it’s simply a situation where they need more so they buy more.

There’s nothing wrong with that, of course. The greatest accomplishment is selling is to develop a relationship based on trust and confidence with a customer. When they buy more from you for any reason, it’s a direct result of that accomplishment, and that’s something you can take pride in.

Just don’t take all the *credit* for that increase in sales! Remember, they can trust you and have confidence in you and love you to death, but if they only use 500 letterhead in a year, that’s all the letterhead they’re going to buy from you!

The lesson here is that the opportunity to “sell” a current customer more of what he/she is already buying from you is mostly out of your control. Selling them new products and/or services, though, is a completely different story. If you take a proactive approach to that selling opportunity, you’re likely to see increases in sales that you can take all the credit for!

Capture Gap

Unfortunately, for many—and maybe even most—quick/digital/small commercial printers, there’s a gap between the understanding that current customers almost certainly have more business for you and being able to say that you’re actually capturing some of it. I think the gap is caused by a fundamental problem in most printers’ selling approach. To put it as simply as I can, I think you’re doing too much “telling” and not enough “asking” in your selling.

Think about this. We’re all exposed all day to people or companies “telling” us things. The newspaper, the radio, the television, the Internet. Family, friends, employees, customers, and all of the salespeople who are trying to sell *us* things! Isn’t it true that we tune out a lot of what people want to tell us? I think it’s a fair assumption that your customers tune out some of what you try to tell them.

Granted, you have to “tell” in order to “sell,” but there is a way to increase the likelihood that customers will listen to what you want to tell them. The secret is simply to ask questions to establish interest, and then “tell” only when you determine that there *is* interest. This means that you won’t necessarily “tell” every customer about every product and/or service they aren’t yet buying from you, but it also means that you will increase the chances that people *with interest will listen* and learn about a product/service/capability they didn’t know you had.

Remember, people buy printing because they *need* it. If they don’t use a particular printed product in the first place, they’re not going to buy it from you under any circumstances. The real objective in selling more printing to

current customers is to make sure that they buy everything that they *do need* and that you *can provide* from you, as opposed to some other printer or supplier.

Product-Specific Questions

So what questions should you ask? That depends completely on what product or service you want to sell! Here are a few suggestions for some of the common elements of a typical quick/digital/small commercial printer's "product line." (You'll note that some of the questions are preceded by "qualifying" statements.)

Copying: "I'm sure you have copiers in your office(s)...would you call them convenience copiers or high production machines? Do you have a color copier? Do you ever have copying projects that your machines can't handle, either because of color or because they're just too slow? Do you ever go out to someone like Kinko's or Office Depot or Office Max to get copying done?"

Stationery: "My experience is that just about every company/organization uses letterhead, envelopes, business cards and things like that. You've never ordered any of that type of printing from us...where do you buy it? Were you aware that that's another kind of printing we specialize in? How many people are there in the company/organization who have their own business cards? How often do you order someone's card? Do you ever notice differences between the cards from order to order...in color, typestyle, or quality? When do you expect to have to order business cards again? Do you use more than one style of envelope? When do you expect to have to order letterhead or envelopes again?"

Forms: "How many different business forms do you use in the business? Are they continuous forms for computers or handwritten or typewritten forms? Do you have forms that you order in pads? Did you know that we print a lot of carbonless and single-part forms for our customers? When do you expect to have to order any of these forms again?"

2/C Marketing Materials: "What do you have in the way of marketing materials? Are there pieces that are 8½ x 11 or 11 x 17, printed in two colors? Would you call these things flyers or brochures...pricelists...newsletters? Were you aware that this kind of printing is right up our alley? Can I come out there one of these days and take a look at some of your marketing materials?"

Mailing: "How much of what you print ends up going into the mail? Does someone spend a lot of time stuffing envelopes and running them through the postage meter? Do you send all of your mail out first class, or are there things you do in which you take advantage of bulk mail rates? Do you find the bulk mail rules confusing? Did you know that we offer mailing services, and we know how to make sure that you always pay the least possible postage? Would you like to talk about this in more detail?"

Other: "As I look at our business, we have five main product lines. We print a lot of stationery—like letterhead, envelopes and business cards—a lot of forms, 2/C marketing materials, we do a lot of copywork for our customers, and quite a bit of mailing for them. There are also things which don't seem to fit perfectly into any of those categories, so I just think of them as "other." What else do you print that might fall into that "other" category? Do you use any labels in your business/organization? Pocket folders? Specialty items of any sort?"

Hopefully, all of this will give you a few ideas on how to approach some of your current customers. Remember, you should know what they're already buying from you, and that gives you a pretty good idea of what they're *not* buying from you. It's a fair assumption that just about every business will have need for at least something in each of these categories of printing and/or copying.

Do you also see how each "product category" gives you something to talk about on one phone call or visit? The idea is to use that category as the foundation for that day's conversation. This element of strategy addresses one of the most common selling problems, giving you a specific selling reason to call on a current customer.

Two Categories Of Opportunity

When you discover an opportunity, it will fall into one of two categories: immediate or in the future. With the immediate opportunities—*yes, we use that and I have to order some soon!*—jump right on top of them! "*Well, as you now see, I can provide that for you, and I want the order!*"

With the future opportunities—yes, *we use that, but I won't have to order any for a while*—find out what “a while” means and schedule a follow up call. I wrote about ACT software a couple of months ago, and this is a perfect example of how ACT—or another contact manager—can help you. If you haven't done it already, I strongly encourage you to purchase one of these products and put it to work for you!

As you apply this strategy, remember that here's always the possibility that the person who buys one product and/or service is not the person who buys the others. A good question with any of these *product queries* is “are you involved in buying (whatever), or is there someone else I need to talk to?” The end result may be a referral—or perhaps better still, an introduction—which also takes you closer to your overall objective of selling more to a current customer.

Closing Comments

You may have noticed that I put the word “typical” in quotes a couple of times at the beginning of this column. It's worth noting that there's a third way to grow a quick/digital/small commercial printing business...through acquisition. There's been quite a bit of that going on in the industry in recent years, in fact, several of my clients have grown by buying purchasing one or more of their erstwhile competitors. That's not an option for everyone in the industry, though, so most of you will have to create growth through the other two channels: gaining new customers and selling more to your current customers.