

Communication Is The Key

What kind of printing do you sell?

I asked that question during a recent seminar, and a young salesperson in the second row called out: “Any kind of printing you need!”

“Bad answer,” I said, and pointed at the person sitting next to him.

“Well,” she said, “we do both offset and digital, and really more short run than long run.”

“Another bad answer,” I said, and pointed at a veteran-looking salesperson in the first row.

“I don’t sell printing,” he said. “I sell business-building solutions.”

“Really bad answer,” I said, and pointed at another veteran-looking person toward the back of the room.

“I’m not playing your silly game,” she said. “Obviously this is some sort of trick question. Tell us what the trick is!”

“It’s no trick,” I said. “In fact, it’s one of the most basic issues you can imagine. Let’s say that we got a bunch of printing buyers together and asked them what kind of printing they buy. How many do you think would answer ‘digital’ or ‘offset,’ or ‘short run’ or ‘long run?’ I think it’s a lot more likely that they’d say ‘brochures’ or ‘business cards’ or ‘mailers’ or ‘manuals.’ It’s one thing to define yourself in terms of production capabilities in a room full of printing salespeople, but you want to speak a whole different language when you’re in front of printing buyers—you want to speak their language!”

Everything Answers and Attitudes

“I still don’t see what was wrong with my answer,” said the young salesperson from the second row. “It covers everything you just said and more!”

“Does it?” I asked. “Let me ask you this, are you equipped to sell banners?”

“Yes, we have an HP inkjet that’s really good at banners.”

“OK then,” I said, “are banners printing?”

“Of course they are!”

“You know that,” I said, “and I know that too, but the question is, do *they* know that? I think it’s possible—and maybe even likely—that they don’t, so you could tell them that you can handle any sort of printing they might need, but they would still buy their banners from someone else because they didn’t hear “I can buy banners from this guy” in what you said.”

“Bottom line,” I continued, “it is your responsibility to communicate with them. It is not their responsibility to interpret what you say. If you ask them to do that, if you *expect* them to do that, you’re going to miss out on a lot of opportunities, and beyond that, an *everything attitude* can get you in trouble.”

“What does *that* mean?” asked the salesperson.

“You have a product line which is theoretically infinite,” I answered, “because it consists of everything you can manufacture plus anything you can outsource. You also have a *strike zone*, though, which is the part of that product line where you’re likely to be competitive, both in terms of price and in terms of the product knowledge that’s required to sell something successfully. One of the classic printing sales mistakes is to get involved in something that’s well outside your strike zone, especially early in the process of trying to develop a relationship. You either come up with a price that’s well outside the competitive range, which usually causes people to disqualify you from any future consideration, or they sense that you don’t really know what you’re talking about, which usually has the same result. You’re a lot better off sticking to your strike zone, especially early in a relationship.”

(I have written about *product line* and *strike zone* before, including “Your Product Line, Your Strike Zone, and Your Selling Proposition” (*QP*, July 2006). If you don’t keep your back copies of *Quick Printing*, you can find that article in the archives at my website, www.davefellman.com, and also in the archives at www.quickprinting.com.)

“I Sell Solutions!”

“I still don’t see what was wrong with *my* answer,” said the veteran-looking salesperson from the first row.

“Printing has become a commodity, and you have to find ways of differentiating yourself in the marketplace. I focus on direct mail, and my whole thing is helping customers to increase their own sales.”

“OK,” I said, “then say *that!* When you said ‘business-building solutions,’ my first thought was that you were in construction. Again, if you ask them to interpret what you’re saying, you’re just asking for a communication failure. The clearer you make it, the more likely it is that they’ll get it!”

The abuse of the term *solutions* is another thing I've written about. If you look in the dictionary, this is typical of what you'll find: **so-lu-tion** *noun*, a method for solving a problem, or the successful action of solving a problem. Here's a definition I found in The Free On-line Dictionary of Computing (©1993-2007 Denis Howe): **so-lu-tion** *jargon*, a marketroid term for something he (or she) wants to sell you without bothering you with the often dizzying distinctions between hardware, software, services, applications, file formats, companies, brand names, and operating systems.

I love the idea of printing salespeople differentiating themselves in the marketplace by conducting effective needs and wants analyses and suggesting real solutions to people's real problems. I hate the idea of printing salespeople *trying* to differentiate themselves with jargon. I don't think it works very well, partly because some people don't understand the jargon, and also partly because many people are as tired of the jargon as I am!

Needs and Wants

To prove that I practice what I preach, I'm not going to ask you to interpret the first sentence of that last paragraph, where I used a term that could be construed as jargon. A *needs and wants analysis* is a probing exercise, intended to help a printing salesperson determine how to gain a customer or win an order. The needs part is all about specifications—what kind of printing they buy in general, or the specs on a specific project. The *wants* part is all about satisfaction with the status quo, and that can mean everything from quality or service problems they've had in the past with other suppliers to what they hope a specific printed piece will do for them.

I hope you'll see that the *wants* part is where you look for those problems that you hope to provide a solution for. I hope you'll also see that the ability to advise a prospect or customer on how to get better performance from a printed piece can be extremely valuable. But like I said to the veteran-looking salesperson in my seminar, you may never get to the *wants* part if they don't understand what you mean by *solutions* in the first place.

For what it's worth, I got an e-mail from that salesperson after the seminar, and he told me that he no longer refers to himself as a *solutions provider*. "Now," he wrote, "I tell prospects I'm a problem seeker, and then I say 'Let me tell you what I mean by that...'"

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