

Courage Of Knowledge Comes From The Printing Sales Knowledge Base

I wrote about *Courage of Knowledge* a couple of months ago (Have Courage, *QP*, November 2004), and I think that theme deserves a little more attention. As I wrote then, it's a lot less frightening to make a sales call when you know what you're selling, and that's true whether you're a "selling owner" or a sales employee. There's a lot more to *Courage of Knowledge* than basic product knowledge, though, and that's what I want to start on today. What I refer to as the *Printing Sales Knowledge Base* is made up of four elements, and it takes solid command of all of them to ensure printing sales success.

Those four elements are: *product knowledge*, *market knowledge*, *operational knowledge* and *selling knowledge*.

Product Knowledge

A printing salesperson's *product knowledge* requirement is substantial; much more substantial, in fact, than salespeople in many other industries face. A printing salesperson has to have knowledge of how the ink or toner gets on the paper; of the paper itself; of prepress and bindery; of handling digital files; and of the capabilities and limitations of the equipment that your company uses to do all of this. It might be helpful to think of all of this as *technical product knowledge*.

There's another important category of product knowledge, though, which I refer to as *applications product knowledge*. The best printing salespeople are also capable of addressing the *purpose* of the printed piece, and helping clients to create printing that will actually perform to it's purpose better. Graphics and design skills, copywriting skills, and basic marketing expertise fall into the this category of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base.

Market Knowledge

The second component is *market knowledge*, which refers to the things a printing salesperson should know about the market itself. Market knowledge includes local business trends; for example what types of businesses are healthy and growing, and what types are experiencing tough times. Market knowledge also includes simply knowing your way around your geographical territory

There's more to market knowledge than "local" issues, though. Market knowledge also includes knowledge of the printing industry in general, and specific trends in the graphic arts which effect a salesperson's performance. As an example, the six most important trends in print ordering and usage over the last few years are (1) shorter run lengths, (2) greater use of color, (3) faster turnaround expectations, (4) digital originals, (5) online ordering and (6) a growing interest in variable data/imaging. I hope you'll see how market knowledge relates to both technical and applications product knowledge. The bottom line here is that the market tells you what you need to know!

Operational Knowledge

The third component of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base is *operational knowledge*, which simply refers to the way the owner of a printing company wants his/her company to run. How is an order entered? What is a "normal" delivery? Who does the pricing, and how much latitude, if any, does the salesperson have in adjusting those prices? How do you want your salesperson to dress when out on sales calls? What are the parameters for taking prospects or customers out to lunch. Who's responsible for picking up artwork, or getting proofs back into the shop, or making rush deliveries?

In my experience, this sort of operational knowledge is the component that gets the least attention in training salespeople. The result can be that the salesperson is never fully integrated into the organization, never made part of the team. What you get then is usually friction between the salesperson and everyone else.

Selling Knowledge

The fourth and final component of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base is *selling knowledge*, and this is another category made up of two distinct knowledge/skill requirements. I call them *organizational skills* and *convincing skills*.

You might think of the "division of labor" here in this way; the challenge of identifying and qualifying prospects is about 80% organizational skills and 20% convincing skills, and the challenge of turning prospects into customers is about 80%/20% the other way.

The first issue in prospecting and qualifying for most salespeople is simply to make the time to do it. It's an unfortunate fact that most printing salespeople are more oriented toward "customer service" than selling. In other words, a typical day involves a lot more contact with current customers and fellow employees than potential new customers.

Some of this is justified, especially in the quick/small commercial segment of the printing industry where it's an economic requirement that most salespeople handle at least some of the estimating/order entry/customer service part of the production process. Much of it is not justified, though—it's just a matter of poorly managed salespeople being allowed to fill their time with customer service activities rather than using it to develop new customers. The solution to this problem is a combination of better sales management and better time management.

The ultimate key to developing new customers is to convince prospects that you represent *better* than what they have right now. That may mean better quality or better service—or even better pricing, although the challenge that the great salespeople face and meet every day is to convince people that they represent better *value* at a higher price.

It's important to understand that there's more to convincing skill than the ability to make a good presentation. In fact, this is another one of those 80%/20% situations. Great salespeople generate 80% of their success through their questioning skills, and only 20% through their presentation skills. The fact of the matter is that the questions define the presentation, or more correctly, the prospect's answers to the salesperson's questions define the *solution* that must ultimately be sold.

Importance

Here's why all of this is important! An understanding of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base will give you a broader means to evaluate your current salespeople. If they're not doing as well as you want them to, the problem could be in any one of these four components. When you know what's really lacking, it should be easier to take effective corrective action.

Here's something else I hope you'll see. All four components of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base are *intelligence factors* rather than *personality factors*. I have always believed that salespeople are made—trained—and not born. I've always looked for bright people to hire as salespeople, and I've always considered a "sales personality" as a plus, but never as a requirement. That's something to consider when you hire your next salesperson. Most of the underachievers I meet were hired because they had an outgoing personality and the "gift of gab"—and that's not nearly enough to ensure success in printing sales!

ACT! Update

I've been a big ACT! fan since I first started using the product back in 1991. I'm disappointed to report, though, that I don't like ACT! 2005 (also called ACT! 7.0). The program has been significantly upgraded, but the new features mostly benefit large companies with multi-user applications, and in my opinion, the program has become considerably more difficult for a typical printing salesperson to use. I bought the new version, but I'm going to continue to use ACT! 6.0 myself, and I'm going to recommend that my clients do the same.

For the time being, ACT! 6.0 is still available. In fact, I've been buying up packages on eBay so I'll have them available for new clients who've never used the program before. If you're interested in a good deal on ACT! 6.0 give me a call!