

Excuses, Excuses...

I had a really weird dream the other night. I was sitting with a group of printing salespeople, and they went around the room, introducing themselves. The first one said: "Hi, my name is Tom, and I'm an underachiever. It's mostly because I don't work very hard." The second one said: "My name is Ellen, and I'm an underachiever too. In my case, it's nothing more than a complete lack of product knowledge. I really have no clue about what I'm supposed to be selling" The third one said: "My name is Tony, and I'm also an underachiever. I could work harder, and probably be more knowledgeable too, but my biggest problem is that I'm totally disorganized and I haven't made even the slightest effort to change that."

I woke up thinking that these were very strange printing salespeople. Can you imagine actually accepting the responsibility for being a poor performer? The underachievers I encounter always seem to blame someone—or something—else. I thought you might be interested in learning how I respond to some of the excuses I hear all the time.

Our Prices Are Not Competitive

Price is without question the easiest thing to blame, because it actually encompasses both the printing company and the buyer. With just one excuse, a salesperson can blame both the printing company for not having the lowest price, and the buyer for not appreciating the value that the salesperson and the printing company bring to the table.

I tell salespeople that I adopted an attitude very early on in my selling career. Whenever I got the order, my thought process went, I could have charged more for it. I always figured that I left at least some money on the table whenever I won an order.

The "flip side" to that attitude, I tell salespeople, is that I couldn't blame price when I lost an order. If I could get my price sometimes, I thought, why couldn't I get it all the time? The most likely explanation was that I must have done a less-than-stellar job of understanding the buyer's needs and wants, or else a less-than-satisfactory job of selling my value proposition. The only other possibility was that I was pursuing someone I shouldn't have been spending my time on in the first place—a price-monster! (That's my term for people who make all their buying decisions based on price, with no consideration of value. I believe that you should let those people weaken your competitors rather than chasing their business and weakening yourself.)

Either way, I tell salespeople, the failure was mine. And that's OK, because you can't sell to everyone. But you can learn from every failure and apply those lessons to the situations and decisions you'll face in the future. If you really do bring value—and learn how to communicate that value effectively—you'll win orders even when you don't have the lowest price.

Here's something else I tell salespeople who hit me with the "our prices are not competitive" excuse. First, I ask them what their company's total sales volume is. (Hopefully they know. If not, I send them off to ask their employer.) Once I hear the figure, I tell them: "OK, what that means is that your prices are perfectly fine for X dollars worth of printing buyers. Go out and find me more people like those people. Don't complain about the people who won't pay your prices. Go out and find more people who will!"

I Don't Have Time To Prospect

I hear three variations of this theme. One is that "taking care of current customers takes up all of my time." Another is that "I have to do all of my own estimates and write up all of my orders and even make my own deliveries." The third is that "I have to watch over my jobs and make sure they get through production. If I don't watch them very carefully, things go wrong and I look bad."

I address this excuse by asking the salespeople if they want—or need—to make more money. The answer is almost always yes. "In that case, it's very simple," I say. "If you want/need to make more money, you need more customers, because you're not making the money you want/need with the customers you have. If you don't make the time to develop some new customers, you aren't going to make any more money. Now, if you're serious about making more money, I'll help you to make some time to prospect, and to do it effectively. If you're not serious about making more money then you're not the right person for this job."

It's worth mentioning, I think, that the majority of quick/small commercial printing salespeople are probably not the right person for the job. Some of that can be addressed with training and better management, but some of it is uncorrectable. If you employ the wrong person for any job, I hope you at least have your eyes and ears open for a

better candidate. I've always found it interesting that most quick/small commercial printers are usually somewhere in the process of upgrading their equipment, but rarely in the process of upgrading their employees.

I Have To Watch Over My Jobs

This one is worth a little more consideration, because in addition to being a time management excuse, it's also a way of shifting the blame for any customer dissatisfaction. I address that element of the excuse by asking the salesperson where the problems come from, and telling them that, in my experience, the vast majority of quality and service problems originate at the point where the specifications are being transferred from the customer to the printing company. "So," I ask, "are you part of the solution or part of the problem? If you can assure me that you've giving your production people all the information they need to get the job done right and delivered on time, then I'm semi-sympathetic. If not, my advice is to do your job right and let them do theirs."

Another thing I tell salespeople is that quality and service failures are simply going to happen in our business. Commitments made in good faith become impossible to keep, and sometimes hard decisions have to be made about which customer to satisfy and which to disappoint. "If you want to make X number of dollars," I tell them, "you have to find X+ number of customers, because you're going to lose some of them to quality and/or service problems along the way."

Our Capabilities Are Too Limited

"There's so much work out there that we just can't produce!" I hear that one all the time. "So you can't sell two-color work or short/medium run work which you're perfectly equipped for," I respond, "but you could sell four-color work or long-run work or large format work or all kinds of other work if you had the equipment. Is that what you're telling me?" The salespeople don't always see the contradiction, but I hope you will.

Quick/digital/small commercial printing is a *market segment*. Another way to express that is that it's a *niche market*. If it were a tiny niche or segment, I would be encouraging printers to expand their capabilities as a top priority. It's a huge niche/segment, though, so I'm more inclined to encourage printers—and salespeople—to expand their market penetration. In other words, there's plenty of work out there that fits your capabilities, and plenty of prospects for that kind of work. Focus on that!

I also remind salespeople that the definition of a fully qualified prospect starts with them buying exactly what you're best equipped to sell. If their needs don't match your capabilities, they're simply not prospects! "You have a job with a company which specializes in short-to-medium run spot color printing," I told one salesperson recently. "If you want to sell medium-to-long run full color printing, you need to get a job with a different printing company. If you want to continue to work for this company, you need to stop making excuses and get to work finding people who buy what you are equipped to sell!"

Don't Tolerate Excuses!

That takes us to the bottom line for today. Don't tolerate excuses from underperforming, underachieving salespeople! If you let them hide behind excuses, their performance will never improve.

Part of a manager's job is to separate the problems from the excuses. If you identify real operational problems that are holding your salespeople back, those problems have to be corrected. If they're only excuses, though, well, then you have an entirely different problem which will also need to be corrected in order for your business to prosper.