

Fellman Weighs In On Ad Specialties

Let me start out today by telling you something about myself: I love ad specialties! I love imprinted pens, key rings, post-it notes, T-shirts and ball caps...especially T-shirts and ball caps! If you offer me anything in the realm of ad specialties with your company's name on it, I'm probably going to take it!

Cy Stapleton wrote about opportunities in brokering ad specialties in the August issue of *QP*. I'll be honest with you; I wouldn't put much effort into selling that stuff if I were you. While I know printers who have been reasonably successful adding ad specialties to their product line, I know quite a few more who've ended up spending a lot of time and money for very little gain.

If you ask me, ad specialties have much more potential for you as a marketing tool than as a profit center. In a world where gaining the interest and attention of a potential buyer is a key challenge, ad specialties—properly used—can be very effective.

Definition And Function

What exactly are ad specialties, and what can they do—and not do—for a printing company? As Cy noted, there is an entire industry dedicated to supplying these items, and that industry's primary trade association, Specialty Advertising Association International (SAAI), defines its products as “useful articles of merchandise imprinted with an advertiser's message and distributed without obligation to the recipient.” The primary function of ad specialties, according to SAAI, is to communicate, motivate, promote, and build recognition.

I read an article a while back which quoted ad specialties industry expert Dick Miranda, the president of a promotional agency called ADSTAR. “Please note,” said Miranda, “that the word ‘sell’ is not part of their function. In other words, ad specialties should not be used to try to replace professional selling techniques, but to enhance them and increase the effectiveness of your overall marketing efforts.”

I think that's an especially appropriate comment for printers to consider, especially printers who have long made use of a couple of the most basic ad specialty items in their marketing—imprinted note pads and “to-do” list pads. I know a fair number of printers for whom distribution of these self-printed ad specialties really represents the whole marketing program!

Those printers tell me that imprinted pads do a great job of “keeping their name in front of their customers.” I won't argue that point, but I would ask this important question: Are the pads actually selling anything all by themselves?

The right way to use ad specialties is as part of an overall marketing plan, and the more thought you give to the exact part you want them to play, the more likely it is that your ad specialties will hit their mark.

Create A Theme

Dick Miranda says that ad specialties work best when they're part of an overall creative theme. What does that mean? Well, one printing company might hand out pocket magnifiers because they're useful—and because they fall into the right budget range. A really creative printing company might make a pocket magnifier part of a “The Closer You Look, The Better We Look” theme. I put a program like that together for a client a few years ago, and I'll tell you more about it a little farther along.

For now, please consider that the theme might suggest the ad specialty you need, or else an ad specialty that appeals to you might suggest a creative theme. Either way, the idea is to think beyond simply handing out things with your name on them. You'll have a much greater chance of gaining sales volume from an ad specialty if you're successful in creating an interesting marketing theme.

Screening Process

Regardless of whether you are theme-driven or item-driven, there are a few questions you should always ask yourself before spending significant money on an ad specialty item.

1. Would *you* like to receive this item?
2. What would *you* do with it when you got it?
3. Does it reflect the image you want to project for your company?
4. Would it appeal to your company employees (and will you make it available to them?)
5. Who exactly among your customer/prospect base will receive the ad specialty?
6. What will *they* do with it? (Will it be likely to be thrown in a desk drawer, tossed in the trash, or used as intended?)

7. Are you sure that each person who will receive your ad specialty is a print-purchasing decision maker? (If not, it doesn't matter what you buy, you'll be wasting your money!)

Big Bang

There is obviously a cost involved in using ad specialties in your marketing, especially if you go beyond your own production capabilities into outside purchased items. And if you've ever looked at an ad specialty catalog, you know that there is something available in literally every price range. So another of the things you should consider is quality vs. quantity.

Let's say you've budgeted \$1 000.00 for the ad specialties portion of a marketing program. With that sum, you could buy 1000 of something that costs \$1.00, or 50 of something that costs \$20.00. The question you should ask is whether you stand to gain more business by reaching out to more people, or by sending something of greater value—and probably greater impact!—to a smaller list.

Lead Generators

I think most printing salespeople will agree with these two statements: (1) The first part of the real selling challenge is to identify the right person to talk to in any prospect company; and (2), It's a lot easier to sell to that person if you can get him—or her—to initiate contact by calling or writing to you.

Now, that's unlikely to happen out of the clear blue sky, but you can "prime the pump" with a direct mail program, and increase the likelihood of success by offering something in return for the response you desire. Ad specialty items can fit that bill very nicely.

I have a number of clients who've had success with two particular items. The first is imprinted note pads, perhaps the least costly of all of the "custom printed" ad specialty items a printer could use. This particular program usually starts off with a mailer that offers FREE IMPRINTED NOTE PADS WITH YOUR NAME ON THEM! All the recipient had to do to get those free note pads is to fill out a small questionnaire/response card.

The key questions on that response card were: Are you the person who buys printing? If you're not, who is the person who buys printing for your company? How much printing do you (or does your company) buy? And, are you working on a particular printing project right now? I'm sure you'll see how the last two questions can help a salesperson to prioritize his or her response.

If the person who responded was not the printing buyer, he or she still got the note pads as long as the name of the printing buyer was provided. In that case, we printed up two sets of note pads, one of them for the person we had now identified as the decision-maker we had to sell to. We always hand-delivered these "gifts" or "rewards," ideally after calling to say that "your free imprinted notepads are ready and I'd like to bring them over to you and talk a little bit about your printing needs." If that didn't result in an appointment, the second option would be to make the delivery on a "pop-in" call.

T-Shirt Marketing

Several of my clients have also had lead-generating success using a free T-shirt as the incentive. This can be quite a bit more expensive than imprinted note pads, but a T-shirt has proven to be a more powerful incentive. Why? I don't think you have to look too far to see that Americans love printed T-shirts. We actually pay companies like Nike and Reebok for the privilege of helping them to advertise their own name and their products.

Just as with those T-shirts, one imprinted with your company's name and logo on it is likely to provide you with some advertising value in addition to its "door-opening" value. It's a fairly safe assumption that it will be worn in places where at least somebody will see it, especially if you do a good job with the design. Still, your primary decision when weighing the cost of various ad specialty possibilities should be the ability to help you with your primary goal, in this case lead-generation.

So the two key questions you should ask yourself in designing this marketing program are: (1) How many leads (based on the value of a typical customer and the amount of sales volume I need to generate) do I have to develop to make this lead-generation program a success? And, (2) how much money can I afford to spend to make these leads happen? If the number of leads you need is low, you can send the mailer out to fewer people and spend more on each "reward." That might point you toward the T-shirt. If you need a large number of leads, you almost certainly need a larger mailing list, and you may need to keep the cost of the "reward" down as part of keeping the cost of the whole program down. That might point you toward the note pads.

By the way, you always want to remember that your ultimate goal is to develop a long-term relationship with each person who responds to your offer. You'll help yourself toward that goal if the "reward" meets or exceeds their expectations. That means a quality T-shirt, not a piece of lightweight, mostly-polyester junk.

It also means notepads that they'll be proud to use in their own personal communications. That, to me, means that *their* name should be the only name on these notepads, not *your* name! You'll have plenty of opportunities to get your name—or better still, your *face*—in front of a prospect if you make a good first impression. You can blow the whole thing with a "gift" they'll be too embarrassed to use.

Freshness And Front-Of-Mind

I think most salespeople will also agree that keeping close—but not too close—contact with customers and prospects is one of the greatest challenges in selling. You want to see them or speak with them often enough to maintain “front-of-mind” awareness, but it can be a very fine line between a salesperson offering or providing a high level of service, and one being a pain in the butt!

What I hope you’ll understand is that you don’t always have to make direct contact to achieve this purpose. And by substituting a “silent salesperson” for some of those routine, “Is there anything I can do for you today?” calls, you can actually gain three benefits. First, you’ll save time. Second, you’ll stay “fresh” longer (which is especially important with prospects. Another of the great selling challenges is to have something “fresh” to say each time you call to try to convince a prospect to *start* buying from you.) Third, the direct calls you do make—either face-to-face or on the phone—will have more *impact* when customers and prospects realize that you only contact them directly when you have something important to say!

Follow A Theme

The most successful ad specialty contact programs I’ve seen share an important characteristic. They were all developed around a specific theme. As I mentioned earlier, one printing company I worked with had established this theme: The Closer You Look, The Better We Look.

I helped them develop a five-part program that started with an inexpensive magnifying glass, imprinted with the company’s name and the words of the theme. They gave these out at a local business-to-business trade show, and passed them out liberally on prospecting and customer maintenance calls. The next item in the sequence was an imprinted flashlight, also fairly inexpensive. The third item was an imprinted printer’s loupe, which cost almost \$6.00 per unit.

As you might imagine, this more expensive item wasn’t given out quite so liberally. The whole idea, in fact, was to qualify prospects along the way. The prospects who still looked good to the salespeople after checkpoints in the contact process continued getting “gifts” as part of this program.

The fourth item in this sequence might not technically be an ad specialty item, but it was certainly an important part of the program. The company bought a very nice telescope (it cost almost \$1200.00) and “raffled” it off. Every order placed during a two-month long period qualified a customer or prospect for a chance in the raffle. (By the way, the months were June and July—always the slowest months of the year for this printer. The whole point of this part of the overall marketing program was to stimulate sales during a seasonal slump, a topic I’ve written on before.)

The fifth item in the series was reserved for special customers. The company ended up buying 26 sets of very nice binoculars, imprinted along the barrel and on the case. They cost about \$150.00 each. Their purpose? To reward good customers! I hope you’ll see how a single marketing program involving ad specialties can contribute to both of the purposes I mentioned earlier.

Other Rewards

When you look at ad specialty catalogs, you’ll find a wide variety of imprintable items at literally every price range! The guiding principle in choosing an item to use as a reward must be its perceived value. That doesn’t mean that you pick the most expensive gift possible, but you should avoid anything that looks cheap, or that won’t be valued.

I’ve seen companies use everything from imprinted leaded crystal to Louisville Slugger baseball bats, imprinted with the name of the customer and mounted on a plaque imprinted with the name of the company. I’ve also seen upscale clothing items used very successfully (including an imprinted black satin jacket that I liked so much that I begged the printer to sell me one!)

Your budget is a consideration, of course. I’m sure some of you think that a \$300,000-a-year quick printer is not going to be able to spend the money for an expensive five-part program like the one I just described. But think about this, the total cost of that whole program was only about \$10,000! That might represent most of a year’s marketing budget for a printer of that size, but the real issue is not the cost, it’s the investment. Will it be effective marketing, and therefore money well spent? It was for the printer I worked with.

The Contact Calendar

Here’s another solid marketing idea with an “ad specialty” item at its core. The main component of this marketing program is a calendar. And while that may not seem at all remarkable, the way the calendar is “applied” to the sales and marketing situation is considerably different than the way most businesses use calendars in their marketing.

It’s not at all uncommon for a printing company to produce a calendar and distribute it to customers and prospects during the “calendar season” at the end of each year. The first thing that’s different about this calendar program is that the calendar is distributed one month at a time!

Now, your first thought may be that this complicates the whole process of getting a calendar into a customer or prospect's hands. It is unquestionably easier to print full-year calendars and distribute them all at one time. But easier is not the issue here, marketing effectiveness is! (And think about this: How many calendars do you receive from various suppliers during the "calendar season," and what happens to most of them?)

Contact Control

I mentioned earlier that I think most salespeople would agree that keeping close—but not too close—contact with customers and prospects is one of the greatest challenges in selling. You want to see or speak with customers and prospects often enough to maintain "front-of-mind" awareness, but you don't want to cross that fine line between service and annoyance!

Sending your ad specialty calendar one month at a time provides a regular means of low pressure contact, maintaining that "front-of-mind" awareness without nearly as great a downside risk as those "Is there anything I can do for you today?" or "Have you got anything for me to quote on?" phone calls, which seem to be the core of so many printing salespeople's selling strategy.

This may seem like "faint praise" for a marketing idea, but think about it: Even if your calendar isn't used—and that's a very real possibility in any sort of "mass marketing" program—you're almost certain to get more impact from having something glanced at and thrown away once each month that you would have gained from a having a "one-shot" calendar glanced at and thrown away during the "calendar season." In this way, the contact calendar fulfills the consistency requirement of any likely-to-be-successful marketing/advertising program.

Holder And Insert

Obviously, if your calendar is used, you'll gain even more impact from having it there in front of your customer or prospect, month after month. How do you increase the chances of it being used? In the program I originally developed, we accomplished that by creating a very attractive permanent "holder" for each monthly calendar "insert." The holder was designed as a desk accessory, a silk-screened acrylic slotted square on an angled pedestal, with an overall size of 4" X 4" and a 3" X 3" slot for the calendar insert. The printing company's name and logo were silk-screened over the slot. These holders cost approximately \$15.00 each, in a quantity of 200.

One of the greatest benefits of this program to my client was that the promotion wasn't limited to a fixed initial distribution timeframe. In fact, the first "mass" distribution of 150 holders and monthly inserts went out in March, creating some distance from the "calendar season." From that point on, a new customer or prospect could be put into the program at any time, by simply delivering a holder with the current month's insert and adding that company to the program's mailing list.

Insert And Carrier

That's the final element of this program. Every month, a new calendar insert was mailed out to each customer or prospect on that mailing list. The 3" X 3" inserts were designed as a die-cut out of an 8½" X 4" "carrier" card. The rest of that "carrier" card provided space for a brief promotional message, following a schedule set at the beginning of the program year.

I hope you'll see how that schedule is important. By planning the promotional message for an entire year in advance, my client was able to produce all of the calendar inserts at one time. That made "fulfillment" easy...just take them off the shelf at the appropriate time, insert in envelopes, address, and mail.

Lower Budgets

The total cost of this program was approximately \$4000.00, most of which went into the holders. Printing and mailing costs totaled only about \$1000.00. Can the principles of this program be applied to lower—or higher—budgets? Absolutely! If you have the ability to spend more money, there are several things you could do to upgrade the "holder," and you could certainly apply the program to a larger list of customers and prospects.

If you have to work on a lower budget, the most important principle of this program is to manage regular contact with a group of customers and prospects. So you might send a larger format "view-of-the-month" planning calendar each month, something that wouldn't require an expensive holder.

Final Thought

I hope you'll agree that there's a subtle difference between naked advertising and "value-added" promotion. Anything that causes a customer or prospect to put more value on a relationship with you is a positive result in marketing a printing company. Ad specialty programs—like this contact calendar or any of the other items I've mentioned—can work for you in exactly that way!