

Have Courage!

Last month, I wrote about being remarkable, and about “a plea for originality, for passion, guts, and daring”—all of that prompted by a client’s referral to a book called *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Becoming Remarkable* by Seth Godin. I noted that I don’t see a lot of guts and daring in printing sales, and promised to write more about sales courage this month. So read on...if you have the nerve!

Three Kinds of Courage

It takes three kinds of courage to be successful in printing sales, and the first of those is *Courage of Knowledge*. This is probably the most plentiful kind of courage for printshop owners in the sales role, and probably the least plentiful for rookie printing sales employees. To put it simply, it’s a lot less frightening to make a sales call when you know what you’re selling! I think *courage of knowledge* explains about half of why it’s easy for a typical printshop owner to go out and meet with a customer or prospect when it’s that person who initiates the contact. The main topic of conversation is likely to be the project that prompted the call in the first place, and talking about a print job is well within most printshop owners’ comfort zones.

For rookie sales employees, talking about a print job can be the scary part. That’s why it’s so important to provide a solid foundation of product knowledge before sending a new salesperson out into the marketplace. I’ve suggested a specific program to provide some of that knowledge (A Two Week Plan For Teaching A New Salesperson About Printing, *QP*, August and September 2002) and you can find that article in the archives at my website: www.davefellman.com.

Courage for Contact

The second kind of courage is *Courage for Contact*, and this is probably the most plentiful kind of courage for sales employees—at least, for those who are well suited to a sales position in the first place—and the least plentiful for typical printshop owners. The opposite of *courage for contact* is often called *call reluctance*, and it’s a killer in the sales world. If you don’t make the calls, you won’t be very successful, and it’s always very sad to me when a lack of *courage for contact* is all that keeps sales success from happening. It’s a lot easier when they call you, of course, and that’s the other half of why typical printshop owners have so little trouble “selling” to customers or prospects who initiate the contact. It’s not the “selling” that’s scary to most reluctant salespeople, it’s the act of making the first move toward a possible (likely?) rejection.

The cure for this affliction is pretty straightforward. You just have to understand that the rejection is not personal. In fact, it’s really just a reflection of three elements of human nature—resistance to change, further resistance to adding anything to what’s probably already a heavy workload, and a general distrust of salespeople. As I tell my sales coaching clients, the odds are stacked against you when you pick up the telephone to try to set up a meeting with a suspect or prospect. The chances of rejection are much greater than the chances of acceptance on any individual phone call, but it’s usually no more personal than having a traffic light turn red as your car approaches an intersection.

If traffic lights don’t keep you from driving, then the fear of rejection shouldn’t keep you from selling. Granted, you need *courage for contact*, but that courage shouldn’t be too hard to find. In fact, just about every successful salesperson will tell you that the fear goes away pretty quickly once you learn that it’s not personal, and you learn that simply by experiencing it.

Courage to Question

The third kind of courage a printing salesperson needs is *Courage to Question*—and by this, I mean the courage to ask provocative questions, and to demand answers! It’s this kind of courage that really separates top sales achievers from everyone else. In other words, *courage of knowledge* and *courage for contact* provide a good start, but *courage to question* will take a printing salesperson to a whole other level. This is where “guts and daring” enter the printing sales equation.

There’s a school of thought in selling that says you should get a prospect in the habit of saying yes to you, by only asking questions that will result in a positive answer. “Would it be good if you knew that your printing would always be delivered on time? Would it be good if the quality always met or exceeded your expectations? Would you like to save some money on your printing?” The next step in that strategy is to say “Well, you’ll get all of that if

you give me your business!” The next question is generally “Have you got anything for me to quote on today?” Granted, the answer to that question may be *no*, but it’s still not an especially courageous question.

So let’s roll back the training tape to the point where you might be tempted to say “Well, you’ll get all of that if you give me your business!” Instead, how about asking “So, do you believe that I can actually do any of that?” Now, *that’s* a courageous question!

It’s also a no-lose question! Do you see how you benefit, even if the answer is *no*? Sure, it would be great to hear that your prospect is “sold” on you already, but if that’s not the case, you’re a lot better off knowing that now, *before* you put more time and energy into a sales effort that is doomed to fail! If you learn what the problem is, you have an opportunity to fix it. If you haven’t got a clue, you also haven’t got a prayer!

Problem Solving

At the most basic level, selling printing is all about solving problems. One of the most basic realities of printing sales is that everyone already has a printer. It’s either you already, or else someone else is selling them the printing you’d like to be selling them. And if they have no problems with the printer(s)-in-place, you simply have no opportunity. *Courage to question* is all about digging to find some problem—some level of *dissatisfaction!*—that you can use to position yourself as a better choice than the status quo.

More printing salespeople have been defeated by “We’re happy with our current supplier” than by any other objection—including the price objection!—and the solution to this problem has two parts. First, you need to learn how to ask probing and provocative questions...to *challenge* the objection. Next, you may have to develop the *courage to question*.

How do you do that? Here’s my best suggestion. At the end of your next prospecting sales call, ask your prospect “How’d I do today? Did I make any progress in turning you into a customer?” If you get a positive answer, ask “What specifically did I do right?” and then ask “What do you think I should do next?” If you get a negative answer, ask “What specifically did I do wrong?” and then ask “What do you think I should do next?”

I think you’ll find that most people will give you thoughtful and honest answers to questions like these, and those answers will either help you to reach your goal of developing a new customer, or else they’ll make it clear that you’re unlikely to succeed with that particular prospect. Either way, you’ll learn that the *courage to question* generally gets you the answers you need. Once you realize that—and realize that you’re unlikely to suffer any physical harm from asking probing and provocative questions—you can start questioning and challenging whatever objections you encounter.

I’m pretty sure you’ll find that courage alone will make you a better salesperson!