

Have You Ever Seen A Purple Cow?

One of my clients recently asked me if I'd read the book about the Purple Cow. I hadn't, but I ran a Google search and soon found myself reading an article by Seth Godin in *Fast Company* magazine, adapted from his book *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Becoming Remarkable*. Godin is a contributing editor to *Fast Company*, and the author of numerous other books on non-traditional marketing. He describes himself as an "author, entrepreneur and agent of change."

The basic premise of both the article and the book is that "the one sure way to fail is to be boring (and) your one chance for success is to be remarkable." To me, that sounds like just a slightly different phrasing of the "unique selling proposition" mantra that's been around for quite a while, and I wasn't particularly impressed. Godin did write something that really hit home with me, though, when he described his work as "a plea for originality, for passion, guts, and daring." I think those four things have a definite place in your sales and marketing strategy, but first, let's talk a little bit about USP's and being "remarkable."

Unique Selling Propositions

There has been a lot of talk about "unique selling propositions" in recent years, and in all fairness, there have been some pretty unique products and services launched into the marketplace. I'm hard pressed, though, to come up with much that makes a printing company unique in any meaningful way.

This subject came up on one of the industry listserves while back, and I challenged the participants to name things that made their companies unique. What came back was pretty much what I expected—a whole bunch of printers saying largely the same things about quality, service, one-stop shopping, technical expertise, online ordering, meeting impossible deadlines, etc. As I wrote to those printers, if you think these things make you unique, you're kidding yourselves.

On the other hand, I wrote, how important really is it to be unique? Personally, I don't think it's important at all. I'd be very happy from a sales and marketing perspective if you could establish yourself as one of the "top-tier" of printers in your area.

Top Tier

Remember, no one really trusts a salesperson until they learn that they can. (By the way, I'm defining "salesperson" here as any person who's trying to convince another person to buy from him/her, and I'm not making any distinction between outside selling, direct mail, or any other strategy you might use to try to make your case. Ultimately, I think that definition makes every printshop owner the "salesperson-in-chief" for his/her company, whether you're out there making sales calls or not!)

I think it's a serious mistake to try to start a relationship with a prospect—especially a large-volume prospect—with a statement that you're unique. Why? Because these people talk to other printers, including the printers they're already doing business with! How will you look if they compare your "unique" capabilities to other offerings and decide that you look just about the same as everyone else?

I'd be more inclined to trust you and take you seriously if you said something like this: "If you look in the Yellow Pages, you'll see that there are 10-20-30-500 printers in the area. I bet it's not too much of a stretch to believe that some of them are better than others, and I think that if you talk to (other) people who've had a lot of experience with printers in the area, they would probably tell you that there are 2-3-4-10 who are absolutely top-tier...the cream of the crop. Well, I'm not going to try to convince you that we're somehow unique, that we can do things that no one else can do, but I am willing to tell you that we are one of that top tier. And here are some more things I can tell you/show you to support than statement..."

If you can make that sale, I think you're in pretty good shape. "Top tier" is a significant competitive advantage, and you will also have taken an important step toward defending your prices if (when?) they turn out to be higher than what your prospect has been paying. "That doesn't surprise me," you can say when the price issue raises its ugly head. "But wouldn't you expect a top-tier printer to charge more than one of the lower-tier printers?"

Remember, this all ultimately hinges on the person you're selling to having had some problem with a "lower-tier" printer. As one of the printers on the listserve I mentioned earlier noted, many people have had a bad experience with a printer—they're "once bitten/twice shy"—and if you want to be the next printer they try, you have to give them reason to believe that you're not just another run-of-the-mill salesjerk who's going to take their money and then let them down. It's also important to understand that you're not likely to get much new business from satisfied customers of other printers. You need to find people who are less-than-fully-satisfied, and convince them that you have the solution to their problems and relief for their pain!

That, by the way, would be my definition of “remarkable” in the quick/small commercial segment of the printing industry—not your ability to produce quality printing and meet impossible deadlines at competitive prices, but rather, the ability to evaluate a prospect’s needs and wants and put together a specific proposal.

You don’t do that with a canned presentation about your unique selling proposition. You do it with a question-driven conversation that identifies those needs and wants. In other words, if there’s a “Purple Cow” opportunity in printing, it’s not what you sell, it’s the way you sell it!

Originality, Passion, Guts and Daring

As I noted earlier, Seth Godin did write something that really hit home with me when he described his work as “a plea for originality, for passion, guts, and daring.” Here’s my evaluation of the quick/small commercial segment of the printing industry: pockets of originality, not much passion left, and very little guts and daring in the sales effort.

There are definitely pockets of originality, and many printers who’ve shown great creativity in the way they manage and market their businesses. On the flip side, though, there are many, many printers who seem to consider it a victory just to get through the day. One of my clients attributes much of this to the “graying” on the industry. “When I was just getting started,” he told me, “I had plenty of passion. After going on 30 years, though, it’s a lot of ‘same-old, same old.’ If I didn’t own the damned business, I probably would have quit the damned job quite a few years ago, and a lot of the printers I talk to feel exactly the same way.”

Perhaps the lack of passion is understandable, but it’s still a factor that holds a lot of printing businesses back from truly high performance. Maybe the answer is to try to find a rebirth of originality and creativity—not a “unique selling proposition” but new way of looking at, thinking about and *talking about* your business. This should start internally, to develop some enthusiasm and perhaps even passion among your employees. Once you get them on board, you can start projecting a new face to the marketplace.

Here’s a suggestion for a good place to start. Take advantage of the opportunity to introduce yourself and all of your employees to your customers and prospects via your website. This is one of the easiest ways to personalize one of the pre-designed website programs available to printers, yet my informal research indicates that only about 15-20% of printers using these websites have anything other than the original “canned” text on the “Our Staff” pages. Most of the “custom” websites I see don’t do a much better job of creating distinction. If I were you, I’d have photos and information about every employee—including yourself!—at your website. Give your customers and prospects the opportunity to get to know you a little better—all of you! Because if there’s anything unique about your business, it is probably the people who work in it.

Guts, Daring and Sales

It’s been said that it takes a special kind of courage to be a salesperson. I don’t agree, but then again, I’ve never been afraid of selling to begin with. (Put a snake anywhere near me, though, and it’s an entirely different story!)

I recognize that it’s also a different story for many quick/small commercial printers and printing salespeople. The fear of rejection is the dominant factor in their lack of selling success. Take a good look at that sentence, because what it means is that if we can remove the fear, we can probably clear the way to much greater success.

I wrote recently that I’ve had lots of success teaching high empathy/low ego drive salespeople to be more *assertive*. (A Feminist Perspective On Printing Sales, *QP*, August 2004) In other words, I’ve been successful at developing their convincing skills just by developing the confidence to ask the right questions and press a little harder for answers. This may not be exactly the kind of “guts and daring” that Seth Godin was talking about, but it’s the kind of courage I think the printing industry needs more of. I’ll write more about that next month!

(Look for that article—titled “Have Courage”—in the Selling Articles section.)