

How To Take A Customer Away From A Competitor

When I first started hanging around with quick printers, back in the late 80's, one of the things that attracted me to this industry segment was the aura of friendly competition. "There's plenty of business for everyone" was the attitude, and probably the reality as well. That was quite a bit different for me, having come from the business forms segment, which had already started to deteriorate. Forms salespeople knew that there *wasn't* enough business for everybody, even back then, and I think that's a lesson most quick printers have finally learned.

One of the realities of your business right now is that every significant prospect is someone else's customer, so the decision to start buying from you has to be accompanied by—or preceded by—the decision to stop buying from someone else. In other words, if you want new customers, you may have to take them away from a competitor.

Solids, Liquids, Gases, Etc.

I have written in the past that all printing buyers will fit into one of five categories: Solids, Liquids, Gases, Players and Price Monsters. *Solids* are happy with and loyal to their current printer, and they simply won't change. *Liquids* are generally happy and loyal, but they'll look at other options. *Gases* have some reason to be unhappy with the printer they've been using, and they're completely open to change. In fact, some of the buyers in this category are actively looking to change.

Players typically spread their work out among a number of printers. They're price sensitive in that they'll often buy from the printer in their "stable" who offers the lowest price on any given project, but they won't necessarily have the lowest priced printer in town in that stable. *Price Monsters* almost certainly will. These are the people who make every decision based strictly on price.

The *gases* probably seem like your most attractive prospects, because they don't necessarily have to be "taken away" from their current supplier. Here's a caution, though. It has been my experience that *gases* tend to be on the price-sensitive and otherwise-problematical side. When pursuing a *gas*, you should always consider the possibility that they caused the problems they had with that other printer!

It's The Liquids!

I think your most desirable prospects are the *liquids*. Here's why. The only difference between a *liquid* and a *solid* is that the *liquids* will talk with you, and they'll usually listen to what you have to say. *Liquids* are loyal to their current supplier, but they're smart enough to look at options. If you win a *liquid* over by improving on their status quo, you can expect them to be pretty *solid* for you—as long as you perform and continue to provide that added value!

Pay attention to the word *usually*, though. If all a liquid hears from you is that you're *capable* of doing all kinds of wonderful things—like digital printing and/or variable data printing and/or printing and mailing and/or anything else—they're probably not going to listen very carefully. The key to taking customers away from your competitors is to identify *pain points* or *performance possibilities*. And *pain points* are the smaller of those opportunities.

Pain Points

Consider this: If the current printer was causing real pain, the prospect would probably be a *gas*, not a *liquid*, right? But that still doesn't preclude the possibility of some minor pain. In searching for even minor pain, I like to ask this question during my first meeting with a prospect: "Is there anything, no matter how small, that you would change if you could?" As a follow-up questions, I'll ask: "On a scale of 1-10, how big an issue is that for you?"

The usual answer with a *liquid* is somewhere in the 1-5 range, but that's still enough to get some traction, assuming that the next steps will include the opportunity to quote on some of this prospect's printing. If your price is "competitive"—read that: either a little higher than the current printer, or not enough lower to justify a change on that basis alone—you can stress that your proposal also includes relief for that minor pain. I watched a salesperson make this sort of case recently. "The prices are close," he said, "but I'm the one who took the time to find out about that one little thing you wish you could change, and we're going to pay special attention to that. I'm hoping that makes just enough difference to win me the order. What do you think?"

In this case, the prospect agreed. This is not a strategy that's guaranteed to work every time, but it worked pretty well this time—and it at least gave the salesperson something to work with!

Performance Possibilities

Performance is the larger of the two opportunities to take customers away from your competitors. Here's a fact: Most of the promotional printing people buy doesn't work very well, and that's especially true of direct mail. Through some combination of the offer, the list, the design or the product itself, most direct mail doesn't get anywhere near the response that it could, should, or that the customer is hoping for. Beyond that, many companies are not even using direct mail in their marketing mix.

That's why I want to spend a significant part of a first meeting talking about marketing, not about printing. I want to learn about the products my prospect wants to sell, and I want to learn about what they're doing to try to sell them. I'm hoping that the product lends itself to direct mail, and also hoping that I can bring something to the table that will represent a better overall marketing strategy.

There are plenty of printing salespeople whose only semblance of strategy is to ask/beg for the opportunity to quote, and neither the solids nor the liquids respond very well to that. The liquids seem to like the idea of better results from their marketing efforts, though. That's the hook that can get them to talk with you, and if you demonstrate real expertise, they'll probably listen.

Bottom Line

Here's the bottom line, though. "I know a lot about modern marketing techniques and strategy, and I can maybe help you to sell more of your products," can be a very effective door-opener, but a canned presentation on PURLS and GURLS and VDP and all that other jargon will probably close the door pretty quickly. If you really want to take customers away from your competitors, you must first learn about the status quo, and then present a serious proposal for improving on it.

I don't know about you, but if I was really convinced that someone could help me grow my business, I'd be pretty eager to work with them.