

I Can *Still* Take No For An Answer

I wrote last month that most printing salespeople should probably be saying “no” far more often in the early qualifying stages of the selling process. A lot of sales time gets wasted chasing after suspects who are not really prospects and who will probably never be good customers. As I wrote last month, qualifying decisions should be made on the basis of *probability* rather than just *possibility*.

I’ll make an exception to that rule, though, as long as we’re talking about companies that buy a lot of the kind of printing you’re best equipped to sell. The way I look at it, there are hundreds and maybe even thousands of low-volume suspects within selling range of most quick/small commercial printing salespeople. With that sort of market density, you really can afford to disqualify these low-volume suspects pretty quickly when they don’t show almost immediate interest in buying from you.

High-volume suspects are a different story, though. They are fewer and farther between, and the nature of the competition that surrounds them pretty much guarantees a longer selling cycle. In other words, people who buy a lot of printing get a lot of attention from printing companies. If you start calling on one of them tomorrow, you’re very likely to find a situation where they’re already using one or more printers, and they probably already have three or five or more other printing salespeople calling on them. You have to expect it to take a while to stand out in a crowd like that!

In a situation like this, I would expect to run into a series of “no’s” before I got anywhere near any orders. But with patience and a plan, I’d be willing to hang in there with a few whale-sized suspects in the hope of generating enough real interest to consider them fully qualified prospects at some point in the future. If I can make that happen, then I’ll extend my patience and my plan in the expectation of turning some of those whale-sized prospects into major customers.

Patience And A Plan

If I started the selling process with a whale-sized suspect tomorrow, I would expect it to take at least six months to get my first order. I would expect it to take at least one month to secure a face-to-face appointment. Remember, we’re talking about people who get a lot of attention from local and maybe even not-so-local printing companies. They don’t need to talk to me, but they might very well agree to a meeting if I give them a compelling enough reason.

I’ve learned, though, that it isn’t good strategy to fire off all of your big sales/marketing guns at once in a situation like this. It’s better to tell them a little at a time, using multiple contacts in an effort to build recognition—and to demonstrate a “soft” persistence.

I might start off with an e-mail. *“Joe, I’m a salesperson from a local printing company, and I’m sure you get a lot of e-mails and calls from people like me. Well, not quite like me. I think there are several ways in which my company and I are different, and several good reasons why you should meet with me. The first of those is that I’m not “cold calling” you. I’ve done some research, and I have some idea of your printing needs. Now I’d like to meet with you to see if you’ve had any difficulty in meeting those needs. What do you think?”*

When I send out this e-mail, I’ll be fully prepared for a negative answer—or no answer at all! That’s OK, because my plan includes a second e-mail to be sent out 4-5 days after the first, this one stressing one of the capabilities I think will be relevant to this individual. The next week I might send out another e-mail, or possibly some samples or other documents through the mail. As noted, I’m trying to demonstrate persistence and build recognition and interest. *Build* is the key word. I don’t expect anyone at this level to stop what he or she is doing and call me when my first communication arrives. And I fully expect them to say “no” until I build up enough reason for them to say “yes.”

Trial Closing

Another element of my strategy is an ongoing series of “trial closing” questions. Take a look back at the question that ends my first e-mail. *“What do you think?”* That’s a trial closing question! The answer you’re hoping for is positive, of course, but a negative answer to a trial closing question is not the end of the world. In fact, it’s often a positive step toward your objective, because when handled properly, a negative response to a trial closing question allows you to get the buyer’s objection out in the open.

I was taught early in my selling career that there are only two answers to a closing/commitment question: “yes” and “no.” I decided early on, though, that I wasn’t going to hear “no.” What I hear is this: *“I have a problem with*

saying 'yes' to you today." And when I hear that, my follow-up question is pretty straightforward: "What is it that's keeping you from saying 'yes' to me today?"

In the very early stages of this selling strategy, you might not get direct answers to your trial closing questions, but you can establish the pattern of asking people to think about their reasons for agreeing or not agreeing with you. Essentially, what you're trying to establish is that it's OK for them to reject you, but they have to tell you why.

Now please consider this. Is it better to hear about rejection before or after the buying decision has been made? What you learn after the fact might help you to win the next order, but what you learn before the buying decision is made might help you to win *this* order!

Pricing Strategy

My final thought for today concerns pricing strategy, specifically the situation where you learn either before or after the buying decision on your first quoting opportunity that your price is the buyer's main issue. The tendency of most printers and salespeople seems to be to lower the price the next time, but I've employed a different strategy. Rather than lowering the price, I try to build on the relationship. There have been several cases in my own selling career where I didn't win the first or second or third quote with a high-volume prospect, but as I focused on the relationship, I started hearing things like: "You're getting closer"—even though I never reduced my pricing level! In at least a couple of cases, within six months, I was getting regular orders at the prices I wanted.

I hope you'll see that with patience and a plan, you too can take "no" for an answer.