

Is Your Jargon Getting In The Way?

I went out on a day of sales calls with a fairly experienced quick/digital printing salesperson a few weeks ago, and his emphasis on most of those sales calls was Variable Data Printing. His company recently installed a new state-of-the-art digital printer, and his boss has made it very clear that she wants to get that machine up and running at its full capacity in a very short time.

So with me tagging along, he went out and told four of his customers and two of his prospects about the wonders of Variable Data and Variable Imaging and One-to-One Marketing, and I'm pretty sure that none of the people we talked to could care any less.

List and Offer

One of the fundamentals of effective marketing is that your target list and your offer must work in concert. In other words, it has to be an appealing offer, and you have to put it in front of a person who's likely to be interested in it in the first place. That holds true all the way from "Dear Occupant" direct mail to direct sales to highly sophisticated One-to-One Marketing. Of the six sales calls we went on that day, three of the people we spoke with were "money-spenders" (that's my term for the people who place orders for printing and related services, but they're not authorized to make significant purchasing decisions), two of them were purchasing agents, and one of them was the president of a medium-sized credit union.

Setting aside the fact that the sophisticated marketing strategies this salesperson was talking about were going way over the head of at least two of the three money-spenders, he was wasting breath and time in the first place because they're not the ones who are going to make the decision to employ these strategies. One of the purchasing agents did show some interest until he asked if One-to-One Marketing would cost more than the 5000 static postcards he's been buying every month.

"Yes," said the salesperson, "but the added cost will be offset by better response."

"That's not my concern," said the purchasing agent. "I get paid to keep our costs down. Fancy marketing is someone else's department."

"Exactly," I said to the salesperson as we left that building a few minutes later. "So far, we've been talking to people who do order printing, but we haven't been talking to anyone who really has anything to gain by taking advantage of your new capabilities. If you want to sell this capability, you have to get to the marketing decision-makers, not just the money-spenders or the purchasing decision-makers."

"Well, OK," he said. "Our next appointment is with the president of a credit bureau. We ought to get better results there, don't you think?"

Starting At The Top

As it turned out, the president of the credit union didn't have much more interest in Variable Data and Variable Imaging and One-to-One Marketing than any of the others. He did offer to set us up with his marketing manager, and told us that "if she recommends it, I'll give it serious consideration."

"That's really disappointing," the salesperson said as we walked to his car a few minutes later. "You can't get any higher in this company than this guy. I would have thought he'd be a lot more interested."

"I'm not sure that he's not interested," I replied, "at least in terms of the benefits to his business. I think he's mostly not interested in being the one who has to learn all about this and figure out how to make it make money for him. He has a marketing manager for that, so that's the level you have to be selling at."

There's a school of thought in selling, by the way, that says you should always try to start at the top of any organization. The logic is that the person at the top is either the critical decision-maker, or else he/she will point you towards the right person. The only flaw in that logic is the person at the top might not be accessible to a printing salesperson. That's OK, though, because it's equally possible to find your way to the right person by starting at a lower level in any organization. The key, of course, is that you have to find your way to the right person!

Variable?

Coincidentally, I accompanied another salesperson on an appointment to meet with the president of a credit union halfway across the country just a week later, and this salesperson also had Variable Data Printing on his agenda. As the conversation developed, I asked the customer if he was reading and hearing about all this "variable" stuff in his industry's trade journals and in banking conferences.

“Not really,” he said, “and in fact, I’m not sure I understand what ‘variable’ actually means.”

“Yeah,” I said, “we all tend to speak in our own industry jargon. What ‘variable’ means in terms of promotional printing—the kind of printing you use to stay in touch with your customers and members and to reach out to your prospects—is personalization. We’ve had basic personalization capabilities for a long time; for example, the ability to do a mail merge to send a personalized letter out to all or part of your customer or prospect list. Those capabilities have expanded to the point where we can personalize the body of a letter too, or the text on both sides of a postcard or brochure, and with the latest generation of digital printing equipment, we can even personalize the images—the pictures—and do it all in one operation at pretty high speeds. We can literally print a customized brochure for each individual customer or prospect, all driven by the information in a database.”

“Wow, that’s incredible,” he said. “I can see how that could dramatically increase our response rates.”

The moral of this story is that, like everything else in selling, you have to be talking to the right people, and you have to speak in terms that they will understand. If you’ve been talking a lot about advanced capabilities like Variable Data and/or Variable Imaging and you’re not getting the results you’d hoped for, I think the chances are pretty good that you’re not in the right place with the right words. Cut back on the jargon, and learn how to explain both the capabilities and the benefits in plain language that your customer or prospect will understand—and back that up with “trial closing” questions like: “Am I explaining all of this clearly? Do you see the benefits in what I’ve described so far?”

Beyond that, make sure that you know the difference between money-spenders and decision-makers. That, by the way, is important whether we’re talking about static or variable, digital or offset, or anything else within the realm of printing sales.