

Knowledge Is Power

Knowledge is power.

That's as true in selling as it is in any other endeavor. But when you talk about knowledge as it applies to printing sales, it often seems like our appreciation of the power of knowledge is limited to product and technical information.

That's important, sure, but it only scratches the surface of what a printing salesperson can know and use to his or her benefit. There's a tremendous amount of power available to any printing salesperson—and any printing company—in knowing all there is to know about the customer.

The Customer As An Individual

The decision to buy from one printing company rather than another one is usually made by a single individual. And it's usually made on the basis of a single consideration. That consideration *isn't* price. It's the consideration of whether the buyer feels comfortable enough with the salesperson—and the printing company that salesperson represents—to trust them with the significant responsibility to *get the work done right*.

Every printing salesperson should understand that. You won't break in with a potential new customer until you get that buyer to the point where he or she trusts you. And you won't keep customers unless you're able to consistently duplicate the behavior that encouraged the buyer to buy from you in the first place. When you look at it from that perspective, you should realize that a good deal of the secret to gaining and keeping customers lies simply in understanding what they want from you, giving it to them, and continuing to give it to them.

Do printing salespeople operate like this? The best ones certainly do. But it's probably fair to say that the vast majority don't. It's the difference between "rifle-shot marketing" and "shotgun marketing". The top performers in this industry operate by determining exactly what a prospect wants, and using that knowledge as the focus of their selling efforts. The "average" printing salesperson typically gains some measure of success by throwing out a broad barrage of statements and promises, some—but not all, or probably even most—of which hit home.

Here's a key point. Understanding what a prospect or customer really wants goes well beyond simply determining what kind of printed products he or she regularly buys. That may determine whether a particular company is a good "product match" for your printing company, but it doesn't address the trust and confidence issues of getting that individual to buy from you!

Today's "average" printing salesperson has to learn to get to those root issues. The way to do that is to initiate a conversation *about printing* as opposed to simply talking about the printing that this individual buys. Salespeople should learn to ask questions that will identify the individual's attitudes. For example:

What are you looking for in a printing salesperson? In a printing company? Are you getting that consistently from the printer—or printers—you're buying from now? What kind of changes would you make—however small—in the way your current printer treats you? What kind of things could I do to make me a more attractive choice than the printer you're doing business with now?

With existing customers, it might be a very good idea to go back and make sure you fully understand why you're getting their work. *What was it that first convinced you to give me your business? Has anything changed in your perspective about what's important in a relationship with a printer? Am I still consistently giving you what you want? Is there anything—however small—that you'd change about our relationship if you could?*

The seeds of a specific strategy to convince—or continue with—a specific individual will be found in the answers to questions like these. For a salesperson, that kind of knowledge is at least as important as technical and product knowledge. In fact, it might best be stated like this: *the salesperson's product and technical knowledge provide a real benefit to the customer, but it's customer knowledge that most directly benefits the salesperson.*

By the way, I am willing to grant you that there are buyers out there who view the lowest price as enough of a reason to trust a printing salesperson and a printing company. But I'd suggest that you might not want those buyers as your customers in the first place! Another of the things that the top printing salespeople know is that you do get to choose your customers, at least to the extent of choosing which prospects you'll spend your time and energy on, trying to convince them to buy from you. Buying a lot of printing is not always enough to make an individual a good prospect. The ultimate quality of a prospect is determined by that individual's attitudes.

The Customer As A Friend

Quite a number of top salespeople will tell you that their customers often become friends as well. Not necessarily close personal friends, but something you might think of as "business friends." A simple definition of this kind of friendship is when a buyer and a salesperson come to respect and enjoy each other to the point where the buyer is

genuinely happy to be able to give the salesperson business, and the salesperson is genuinely happy to provide products and service that are intended make the buyer look good.

How do you develop a business friendship? The most natural way for any friendship to start is for two individuals to learn that they have similar backgrounds, interests, or attitudes. But, the most important of those factors aren't always clearly displayed in the printing sales situation, especially in the early stages, when the salesperson hasn't yet developed the sense of trust and confidence that ultimately leads to orders.

It's one thing to pick up on surface interests, like an interest in golf or tennis, or being fans of the same local sports team. Those interests can often be determined just by keeping your eyes open in the buyer's office. It's a very rare person who doesn't have some clue to his or her interests in his or her workspace. But remember this...whatever you learn from the knickknacks and decorations in a buyer's office is just as visible to any other printing salesperson. It would be better to find something deeper. What you'd really like to find is the most eclectic or limited area of interest that you and this individual share.

The key, again, is to gain knowledge of your customer or prospect. And the wise salesperson understands that it's he or she who must take the initiative. Some of this knowledge can be gained by direct questioning. A single personal question at the end of the first face-to-face conversation might start the process. *Where are you from originally? Where did you go to school? What do you enjoy doing outside of the office?*

If a buyer should ask you why you want to know—and that has happened to me—tell the simple truth. I'm looking for some common ground between us.

Other personal—and business—information is available from a variety of other sources, including directories, annual reports, newspaper and magazine articles, or even networking groups. Quite a lot that can be learned through some basic detective work. For example, you can ask the buyer's secretary or assistant if he or she knows where the buyer grew up, or went to school, or what the buyer enjoys doing outside of the office. Gaining that knowledge outside of the buyer's office puts you one step closer to a business friendship once you get there.

Don't overload on the friendship side of the equation, though, especially early on. It's important for a salesperson to build professional respect—trust and confidence—first. In fact, the best strategy might be to recognize that these factors are the “customer-getters.” Building a business friendship is more of a “customer-keeper.”

The Customer As An Organization

An important part of building trust and confidence is to understand the buyer's business. *What do these people sell? Who do they sell it to? How do they reach the marketplace? Where do they rank in their industry? What are their goals? What are their strategies?*

Why is this sort of knowledge important to a printing salesperson? It's really as basic and simple as this...the more you know about what your customers and prospects are trying to do, the better equipped you'll be to show them how to do it better. This is where your product and technical knowledge really pay off for your customers and prospects.

Learning about the customer's business is the absolute essence of consultive selling, and it's no less than the difference between bidding for the lowest price and selling real value. Consultive selling is at the heart of an idea that's growing rapidly in acceptance in the 90's...that the role of a supplier is to improve the client's business, not merely to service it.

That can mean any number of things in the printing sales arena. Reducing costs will certainly improve a client's business situation. Remember that reducing costs does not have to be the same thing as lowering your prices. The consultive salesperson is looking for opportunities where a change in the specs or in the production process can take some cost out of the job without affecting the ultimate performance of the printed piece.

Another possibility is to actually improve the performance of the printed piece. Most of what the market refers to as “commercial printing” is promotional in nature, and it's ultimate purpose is to sell something. The consultive salesperson is looking for opportunities to make the printed piece sell more of what it's intended to sell.

The specifics of those opportunities to reduce cost or improve performance aren't what's important here. What's important is the understanding of the way knowledge turns into money. Especially the understanding that product and technical knowledge won't stand alone in the printing market of the 90's. Without customer knowledge to show salespeople exactly where and how to apply them, product and technical knowledge will have only a fraction of their potential value to the quick printing industry.

The Customer As An Indicator

Customer knowledge offers one more benefit to printing salespeople, and to printing firm managers and owners. The things you learn about your customers help you to define your own strengths and weaknesses, and allow you to plan for the future accordingly.

The knowledge that customers want to be able to do certain things can guide your equipment purchasing strategy, or your labor planning. The knowledge that problem-solving is of increasing importance might cause you to take another look at the capabilities and make-up of your salesforce. At the very least, it should cause you to stress the importance of asking the questions that lead to customer knowledge.

Simply recognizing any similarities among your current customer base can go a long way toward telling you what prospect companies you should target your sales resources on in the future. If most of your current customers are medium-sized manufacturing companies with small in-house marketing departments, the message from your customers is that you have a talent for convincing the individuals in that sort of company to do business with you. That kind of customer knowledge gives you an opportunity to do more of what the market is telling you you're good at, and less barking up wrong trees.

The Customer As A Critical Business Asset

Here's one final consideration. Beyond the increased sales and profit opportunities provided by better customer knowledge, there's one absolute necessity. And that necessity is that you know all of the "contact facts" relating to each and every one of your customers. What are the names, addresses and phone numbers? Who makes the actual buying decisions? Who signs the purchase orders? Who pays the bills? What have they bought from you in the past. What opportunities does that suggest for the future. And who would you, as the owner, go and talk to if something happened with the salesperson handling the account?

Every printing company should maintain a comprehensive data form for every customer, and be working at a complete data form for every key prospect. Any well-run business has to consider it's customer list to be among it's most critical business assets. And maintain is a key word, this information should be checked and updated regularly.

Because information is the basis of knowledge. And knowledge is power.