

Little Victories Add Up To Big Wins

We live in a society which places a high priority on instant gratification, and that makes it all the more difficult for many printing salespeople that relationships—the foundation of any successful selling effort—take time to build. I've observed that most of the salespeople I work with want everything to happen NOW, and so do most of the printshop/copyshop owners who employ them. The salespeople want to walk into people's offices for the first time and walk out with orders, and the owners want to be able to hire a salesperson and see \$10,000 worth of brand new business by the end of the first month.

Unfortunately, neither of those things is very likely to happen.

Trust Is The Essence

The most successful printing salespeople understand all about relationships. They understand that the essence of the selling challenge is to develop trust and confidence, and that when that's accomplished, all sorts of good things will happen for the salesperson. Many of the under-performers in our industry think that getting people to like them is all that's necessary, but the real top performers know that there's a substantial performance difference between "like" and "trust."

"I know quite a few of my competitors," one of my top performers told me recently, "and even I like most of them. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that my customers like them too. But I get the business, because these customers don't just like me, they trust me. And that's because everything I say and do with them is all about building and maintaining their trust."

Another one of my top-performing clients put it a little bit differently. "I think you can build 'like' out of 'trust' more easily than you can build 'trust' out of 'like,'" she said. "There's no shortage of 'nice' people out there selling printing, but there sure seems to be a shortage of salespeople who go beyond that 'you like me so please buy from me' approach."

Both of these salespeople understand that selling requires much more than an outgoing personality. It requires a commitment to the building of trust and confidence, and the understanding that such a thing can't be rushed. In seminars, I try to reinforce this idea by telling attendees that a printing salesperson's ultimate "sales pitch" can be distilled down into just two words: "Trust Me!" The whole idea that a salesperson can make that request early in a relationship and expect the prospect to "buy" it is purely laughable. Think about it, what do you do when a salesperson—or anyone else—says "trust me?" If you're anything like me, you discretely tap your back left pocket to make sure that your wallet is still there, and then you look for a way to escape!

The bottom line here is that salespeople make promises throughout the selling process, and the whole issue for the prospect is whether those promises can be believed. And by the way, those promises are not always spoken out loud, but they're binding nonetheless. One more thing to consider is that the *need* to make promises in selling starts well before most salespeople even get the chance to make promises about delivering some particular print job by a particular date.

What Promises?

What promises am I talking about? Here's a partial list for your consideration. (I promise that) we have exactly the right equipment to meet your printing/copying needs. (I promise that) we have a team of dedicated professionals back at the shop who are absolutely committed to your satisfaction. (I promise that) we have quality control procedures in place to make sure nothing goes wrong on any of your print/copy jobs. (I promise that) you will experience a level of personal service that will make you happy to pay a premium to do business with us. (I promise that) we'll do every bit of required preventative maintenance to make sure that you'll never have a problem because one of our machines has broken down. (I promise that) nothing will go wrong, but if it does, we'll fix it to your satisfaction immediately. (I promise that) your personal satisfaction will always be our highest priority.

If you don't think that everyone who sells on behalf of your company—inside or outside—is making those promises, you're kidding yourself. Even if some of the words are never spoken out loud, these promises are *assumed* by your prospects and customers. And while it's been proven that some people will "give you a chance" more easily than others, you have to accept the likelihood that they'll give someone else a chance just as easily the next time around, especially if you leave something to be desired in terms of performance on that first project. And, experienced salespeople will tell you that it would be nice if they met people every day who would "give them a chance" without first having to prove their worthiness of trust and confidence. The reality is that you usually have to

“prove it” before you get any sort of real chance. (By the way, by my definition, of a “real” chance doesn’t include being one of 3 or more printers who gets to quote on a particular project. In order to be categorized as a “real” chance, the decision-making process has to be about more than just the lowest price.)

Measuring Success

It bothers me that so many quick/digital/small commercial printshop owners measure the performance of a salesperson strictly by the number of quotes he/she gives out, or by the number of orders gained from those quotes. This encourages salespeople to consider an opportunity to quote on a job as a significant victory, when the fact of the matter is that it’s usually anything but. The printing/copying marketplace is literally crawling with salespeople whose only semblance of a marketing plan is to call on prospects and customers and ask: “Have you got anything I can quote on today?” What most of those salespeople are really saying is this: “I can only think of one reason you should buy from me—price—so let’s take a look and see if I’ve got the lowest one.”

I went out on a first appointment with a new prospect with one of my own new sales coaching clients last summer, an appointment for which the prospect had prepared by gathering up samples of everything his company bought from printers—letterhead, envelopes, business cards, forms, product manuals, pricelists, and various promotional pieces in a wide range of finished sizes and color configurations. The salesperson I was with was absolutely beside herself with excitement. “Thank you very much,” she said. “I’ll go right back to the office and start getting these prices together for you.”

I asked her to hold on for a moment, and then I asked the prospect when he needed to have the quotes back to him. “Oh, no particular time,” he said.

“OK,” I said, “when would you like to have them back?”

He looked at me kind of strangely and said: “Didn’t I just answer that question?”

“No,” I answered, “you said that you didn’t need them back at any particular time, and that sort of leads me to believe that you don’t expect to order any of these things anytime soon. And from that, my assumption is that all we’re really doing here is comparing prices between our company and the printers you’ve been using.”

“Well, yeah,” he said, “but I’m just trying to be cooperative. Every time I meet with a printing salesman, he asks me for the chance to quote on all my printing. I guess I thought that’s what all you printing salespeople wanted!”

“It’s not what I want,” I said. “I want to build a relationship with you that’ll be so strong that you’ll want to buy from me no matter what my prices look like.”

“Well, I’ll tell you,” he said. “I’m not 100% sure about ‘whatever your prices look like,’ but I base pretty much all of my buying decisions on the relationship. I get prices from printers all the time that are lower than what I’m paying now, but I keep on buying from the people I trust, even though I know it’s costing me at least a little more.”

Trust and Confidence Points

“I very much appreciate that,” I said, “so let me ask you again, when would you like to have these quotes back in your hands?”

“Well, I guess I have to tell you again,” he said, “I don’t need to have them back at any particular time. Why are you pressing this anyway?”

“Because you just told me that price isn’t the most important thing for you,” I said. “Trust is, and I need to show you something that indicates that you can trust us. I just want you to tell us when you want them so we can promise to have them back to you by that time, and then keep that promise. My main goal here is to gain us a few ‘trust and confidence points.’”

He sat very quietly for a moment, and then he said: “That is just about the smartest thing I think I’ve ever heard a salesman say. OK, I’d like to have those quotes back from you one week from today.”

I looked at my client, she nodded her head, and I said: “You can count on that. It’s a promise!”

A Little Victory

From my perspective, we won a little victory that day. We didn’t get an order, but we did take a solid step forward in building a relationship based on trust and confidence. We made a promise, and my coaching client won another little victory the following week when she kept that promise, presenting the prospect with a proposal that covered most of the items he had given us to quote on.

(This is important, by the way. He gave us a total of 29 items, of which 17 were a good fit for this company’s internal production capabilities. On my advice, the salesperson politely declined to quote on the other 12 items. “Some of your printing needs are right up our alley,” she wrote to him in a cover letter, “but some of them are not. I would never ask you to consider me for jobs that we’re not the right printer for, but you can count on me to ask for your serious consideration on the jobs that we are set up to handle efficiently.” Could she have found a source for the other 12 items and quoted them anyway? Of course she could have. But in my judgement, she had more to

gain from focusing on gaining the prospect's trust than she would have gained by projecting her company as a "one stop shopping" source.)

Stepping Stones

One of the most important differences between successful salespeople and under-performers is that the latter category tends to "hope" that relationships will build, while the former set out with a defined plan to make it happen. The real winners in this game take a big picture approach to the challenges they face. They don't expect anything worthwhile to happen fast, so they chart out a series of "little victories" that clearly represent progress.

Finding a company that seems to have requirements for the specific type of printing/copying they sell is a little victory. Identifying at least one decision-maker within that company is another little victory. Making that first connection on the telephone and confirming that you do in fact have the right person is still another little victory.

There are obstacles, of course. Voice mail is a good example of an obstacle that keeps many printing/copying salespeople from ever making that first telephone connection. How do top salespeople address this obstacle? Unlike most of the under-performers, they don't just complain about not being able to connect with people because of voice mail. Instead, they examine the problem and come up with a relationship-based solution!

The first step in this solution might be to send a letter—or a series of letters—before attempting a telephone connection. It might be easier to fully appreciate this strategy if you think of building a relationship in the same way you'd build a house. Before you build any rooms to live in, you have to build a foundation and framework to hold the whole thing together. In a world where most salespeople try to introduce themselves to prospects out of the blue and over the telephone, the salesperson who builds a foundation and framework for trust and confidence first can create a solid competitive advantage.

How do you accomplish that? Send a letter of introduction and promise to write again soon with more information. Then send that second letter and/or an information package and keep that promise. With the second mailing, make another promise, perhaps to call within a specific timeframe to ask for an appointment.

When you make that phone call, you may still get connected to your prospect's voice mail, but consider what you can now say: "I wrote to you a while back and I promised that I was going to send you more information—which I did—and I also promised that I was going to call you to set up an appointment. That's what I'm doing today. I know you probably get a lot of phone calls from printing salespeople, but I'll bet that very few of them show you any evidence that they'll actually keep all the promises they make to you. If nothing else, I hope I've started you toward believing that when I tell you something's going to happen, it is going to happen. We're still a long way from having the kind of relationship I know you want to have with your printer, though, so call me back and we'll set up an appointment and take the next step."

Please understand that I'm not trying to tell you that a strategy like this will work every time. All I'm trying to tell you is that this is the way you work at building a relationship, not by calling cold on the telephone and asking anyone who does agree to see you for things to quote on. I hope you'll also see how a strategy like this makes voice mail much less of an obstacle. In fact, after setting the stage first, I'd view the opportunity to leave a message like this one as another little victory, and I think you'll agree that when someone does call you back and agree to an appointment, that's a significant victory!