

Live And Learn

One of the things I enjoyed the most about *Quick Printing's* Sixth Annual Industry Conference was the presentation by keynote speaker Patricia Fripp. She's an interesting and enthusiastic speaker, and quite a few of the things she said made very good sense to me.

But of all the things she said, I thought her most interesting observation was that "life is a series of sales situations." In the context of her presentation, she was talking about how often we seem to find ourselves involved in a process of determining what someone wants or needs, telling them what we think the best course of action is, and convincing them to take it.

That comment got me thinking about a broader context, and I decided to write to you this month about how life is a series of sales *and* marketing situations. And how I think you can learn a lot by paying attention to some of the *sales and marketing* that's going on all around you.

Have you ever thought about this? Some very talented (and admittedly some far less talented) sales and marketing organizations are doing their absolute best to convince you to buy their products every day. How are they going about it? Are their strategies and techniques working? And most important of all, what can you learn from the experience of all of these other sales and marketing organizations and apply to your business?

Here are a few examples of what I'm talking about:

The Coca Cola Polar Bears

A couple of weeks ago (as I write this), Coca Cola started running a series of television commercials featuring animated polar bears. The bears are cute and friendly-looking. They don't talk, but at the end of each commercial, they drink Coke and smile very contented smiles. It's an understated ad that attempts to tell us—or remind us—that if we drink Coke, we'll feel like this too.

What can a quick printer learn from this ad? I think one of the lessons is that it represents a change of pace from the "MTV-style" advertising that has become so much a part of the "cola wars." But it doesn't represent a total strategic departure by Coca Cola from that style of advertising. Coke's marketers know that no single ad or style of ad will appeal to all of their potential customers, so at any given time, they have several styles of advertising going on.

Obviously, The Coca Cola Company has greater resources than any quick printer. They can afford to run separate and different marketing and advertising programs to reach different segments of their total market. But even a small quick printer can apply the same principle by alternating styles within a single marketing program.

The typical quick printer who would qualify as an "active" direct mailer sends out essentially the same self-mailer or package each month. If not exactly the same package, at least something that has a familiar "look" to it. Some people respond to that "look" and to the content of your mailings, but some don't even open it up and look inside.

Why not create two "looks" and alternate them. Perhaps a conservative design to go out on odd-numbered months, and a "jazzy" or highly contemporary design to go out *to the same people* on even-numbered months. In effect, you would have two programs reaching out to the different personality types within a single mailing list. If even a small percentage of people who would have ignored one "look" decide to open up and act on the other, you're a winner.

Polar Bears, Part Two

I think there's another interesting and important lesson to be learned from Coke and its polar bears. Do you remember that several weeks after the ads first appeared, there were all-of-a-sudden stuffed Coca Cola polar bear dolls available in stores and at fast food restaurants? If you know anything about product development, you know that there's no way that could have happened unless it was planned months before. What you saw was that Coke anticipated that people would find the bears attractive. The *anticipated* a response from the marketplace, and *planned* their reaction well in advance.

Do you plan in advance for the success of your marketing programs? Do you have a promotional package or kit made up with a description of your philosophies and capabilities, samples of your work, and a listing of some of your current customers to send out or give out to people who respond to your mailings or other advertisements? (Or for that matter, to anyone who walks in for the first time for *any* reason!) The classic story is of the marketer who doesn't prepare for response before sending out a "lead-generating" mailing. The mailing works great, and he gets 60-70 responses from people interested in learning more about his company. But he's not quite sure how to follow up on all of this interest, and because the task now seems overwhelming, he ends up "putting it off" until the leads become stale and worthless.

Coke planned for what came next, and you should too!

Supermarket Strategies

We have three major supermarket chains in my area, and they each take a different approach to the message in their marketing. Food Lion focuses its advertising purely on low-prices. Their ads carry the message “shop here because *everything's* less expensive here.” Winn-Dixie focuses on the quality of its meats. Their ads feature “the Winn-Dixie Brand” (as in a cattle brand) of meats and they call themselves “The Meat People.” The message they’re trying to get across is that you should come to Winn-Dixie for the best meat in town, and while you’re there, you should buy whatever else you need, even if it might be a little more expensive than Food Lion. The third player, Harris Teeter, advertises as “the only low-price supermarket that refuses to act like one.” Their ads show happy shoppers and employees, well-stocked shelves, wide aisles and other “value-added” features. The message they’re trying to project is that you get a little more than just groceries for your money at Harris Teeter.

Who’s getting the best results? From what I can see, they’re all doing pretty well in terms of traffic. A survey of their parking lots on a typical day seems to show about the same number of cars. But what’s interesting is the *type* of cars in each parking lot. Food Lion’s lot always seems to have a majority of older cars, some of which are pretty well beat up. Winn-Dixie tends to have newer cars, but mostly smaller ones. They also have a lot of pickup trucks. Harris Teeter’s lot tends to be populated by larger late-model cars and a lot of minivans.

What I think all of that means is that Harris Teeter is getting most of the business from the upper-middle class families who tend to spend the most money on groceries. (I wonder if it’s significant in any way that Harris Teeter’s parent company also owns Jordan Graphics, one of the largest printing companies in the South? Do they know something about competing in “commodity” industries that the other supermarkets don’t?)

The lesson here is about *positioning*. If you advertise that you’re cheap, you’re probably going to attract the people who want—or need—to buy cheap. If you advertise higher quality at a correspondingly higher price, you’ll probably have fewer customers, but you might make a very satisfactory profit. If you can find a position somewhere in the middle—which is what I think Harris Teeter has done—you can probably charge a little bit more than the low-price competition *and* capture a larger market share, making profit on margin and volume.

You really can decide who you want to sell to, but a message that’s consistent with your targeted market and *positioning* is essential for success.

Affinity Marketing

Within just the last few months, I’ve been solicited on the phone or through the mail to accept a Visa or Mastercard with a tie-in to the University of New Hampshire (my alma mater), The University of North Carolina (just because I live nearby, I guess), The Charlotte Hornets (or any other pro sports team I would prefer), and perhaps 10-12 other organizations I have some real or imagined interest in. In the case of the UNH Visa card, the UNH Alumni Fund would get a small percentage of every dollar I charge on the card. In the case of the sports team cards, I’d only have the pleasure (prestige?) of showing that I’m a big fan of the team by whipping out the card.

Affinity marketers are attempting to leverage your interest in any number of organizations or activities. And it’s working. Affinity credit cards and merchandise programs are very hot in the marketing universe right now. They entice you to buy because you are—or want to be—part of something.

Are there opportunities for this type of marketing in the quick printing universe? How about an affinity marketing program for your local civic group? For every dollar spent by a Rotary, Kiwanis, or Chamber of Commerce member, you could offer to donate \$.05 to a fund or charity the group supports. A really imaginative printer might try to get a little competition going among the various civic groups in his or her town, to see which could generate the largest contribution through their purchases.

The radio station I listen to provides an established affinity program to its advertisers. Any listener can get a “Q-Card” just for calling in. As an advertiser, you can promote something special to anyone who shows you the card. That could be a discount, but I might take another approach and offer something like a “free graphic image consultation.” The thinking behind that, of course, is just to entice people to come into your shop. Once you get them there, you’re in position to learn more about their printing needs and tell them all about your capabilities. And wouldn’t it be a good idea to be prepared for respondents to a program like this with a promotional package or kit like we discussed earlier?

Marketing Awareness

Not too many of us in the quick printing world have advanced business degrees, but there’s a real-world business school going on all around us every day. There is a great deal for all of us to learn if we maintain a “marketing awareness” and take an interest in what others are doing in their sales and marketing efforts.

What are they doing? Why are they doing it that way? Will the same strategy or technique work for me? Those are the important questions! That’s how you profit from the fact that “life is a series of sales and marketing situations.”