

Make It Work!

My wife is a devoted Project Runway fan. If you're not familiar with the show, it's one of those reality TV competitions where one contestant is "voted off the island" every week. The contestants on Project Runway are fashion designers, and every week, they face a design challenge and viewers get to watch them shop for fabric, construct their outfits and send their models down the runway. You also get to watch the designers bite, claw and scratch at each other, which of course is where the fun is.

Heidi Klum is the host of the show, but another important player is Tim Gunn, who serves as the designers' mentor during each challenge. Gunn is the Chief Creative Officer at Liz Claiborne, and before that, he was the design chair at the Parson's School of Design in New York. At least once during each episode, Tim exhorts the designers to "make it work!"

Solids, Liquids, Gases, Etc.

I have written in the past that all printing buyers will fit into one of five categories: Solids, Liquids, Gases, Players and Price Monsters. *Solids* are happy with their current printer, and they simply won't change. *Liquids* are generally happy, but they'll look at other options. *Gases* have some reason to be unhappy with the printer they've been using, and they're completely open to change.

Players are the ones who spread their work around, and they're price sensitive to the degree that they'll usually give the order to whoever has the lowest price among their stable of established suppliers. They won't have the cheapest printer in town in that group, though, because if they did, they'd be *Price Monsters*. That's my term for people who make all of their buying decisions based strictly and only on price, and who are always looking for even lower-priced suppliers.

When you're prospecting—and you are doing lots of that, right?—it usually doesn't take long to determine which category the person you're talking to fits into. The *solids*, in fact, often won't talk to you, other than to tell you that they're happy with their current supplier. The *price monsters* are usually happy to talk to you, because you might offer them lower prices than what they're paying now. I hope you recognize, though, that you don't really want to be talking to them beyond the point of identifying their buying style. This business is still about *profit*, and you do not want customers who contribute volume but not profit to your business.

Let me repeat that. You *do not* want customers who contribute volume but not profit to your business. There's something scary going on in the marketplace right now, as the casualty rate among printers has increased. Whenever a printer goes out of business, all of that printer's *work* needs a new home, and in far too many cases, it was the *work*—high volume but low margin—that put the printer out of business in the first place. That low margin *work* is usually connected to a price monster customer, and some of those customers are like serial killers. They hurt every printer they buy from.

It's The Liquids

Obviously the *gases* are exciting prospects, because they're at least partway to the decision to start buying from you. And unless they're *price monsters* in addition to being *gases*, their issues and problems with the previous supplier can be your justification for a higher price.

The *players* can be exciting as well, especially if they're large users. I'd be happy with a solid share of the business from a company that buys \$100,000 worth of printing each year. Even a 10% share might put them in the upper reaches of your customer list.

The most exciting prospects of all, though, are the *liquids*. Why? Because the only difference between a *liquid* and a *solid* is that the *liquid* will talk to you and listen to your ideas. And if you win a customer on the strength of your ideas—as opposed to your prices—you stand a lot better chance of a long and profitable relationship.

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OK, this is where "make it work" must become your mantra. A *liquid* will talk to you, but you have to lead the conversation. And you do that with *questions*, not with a canned presentation. Remember, a *liquid* is generally happy with the status quo. It's unlikely that you're going to suggest a meaningful improvement on that status quo unless you completely understand it, and unless they do as well.

I spent a day last week with a salesperson who has really embraced this idea. We spent about 25 minutes talking with the owner of a local building products company, and during that time, the salesperson didn't say

anything about his company or its capabilities. He asked about the prospect company's products, its sales and marketing strategy, and its hope/dreams/plans for the future.

It was obvious that the owner had hope and dreams, but he was a little short on plans and strategy. He admitted that he didn't really know how his two salespeople generated leads, or whether the printed collateral he was buying from another printing company was really effective. He did know that he was happy with the quality and service he was getting from that company.

Here's what my client proposed: "Let me talk to your salespeople. In fact, let me go out on some calls with them, to learn how they operate and to see how your customers react to your collateral materials. Then I'll come back here and report to you on what I find, and it won't surprise me if I come up with some ideas on how to improve your sales and marketing efforts."

The owner asked: "What will this cost me?"

The salesperson replied: "The research won't cost you anything. That's my investment. Now obviously, I hope to make money selling you printing, but the first issue is whether I come up with something better than you're doing now in terms of sales and marketing strategy. If all you need is a printer, it sounds like you've got a pretty good one. We're very good at the printing part too, but I'm hoping to win your business by being more than just a printer."

Printerto Partner

I think you'll agree that this story reflects a transition that many quick/digital/small commercial printers are trying to make, from *printer* to *marketing partner*. I hope you won't think that making sales calls with a prospect's salespeople is a crazy idea. It's a little out of the box maybe—at least, out of the current box—but it's exactly the sort of thing you're going to have to do if you really want to make this transition.

Bottom line: It ain't gonna happen on its own. You have to make it work!