

Mid-Course Corrections

I spent some time with my older brother last weekend. He's a rocket scientist. (Well, OK, he's an engineer, and there is a difference between pure science and engineering, but he's involved with software for rockets and missiles and that's close enough for me.) He was explaining the challenges of guiding guided missiles, and it should be no surprise that the biggest challenge is keeping the missile on course, especially when the target is moving too.

"We've got the timing of mid-course corrections down to very small fractions of a second," he told me. "That keeps the missile very close to the best track to the target. And at the speed these things are traveling at, it doesn't take very long to get too far out of position for a successful intercept."

That got me thinking about mid-course corrections to a printer's sales and marketing plans. They don't move as fast as a missile, of course, but it's still true that it doesn't take all that long to get too far out of position for a successful result.

You Do Have A Plan, Right?

I hate to mention this, but I know enough quick/digital/small commercial printers to know that I can't safely assume that you have a sales and marketing plan in the first place. If you do, you can ignore the following sentence. If you don't, then I have to ask you WHY THE HELL NOT?

It's been said that failing to plan is exactly the same as planning to fail. OK, that may be a bit strong, but I think it is fair to say that a lack of planning is the main problem for most of the underachievers in the industry. It's convenient to blame the competition or the economy, but the sad fact is that most printers are *reactive* rather than *proactive*. Here's another expression I know you've heard, the one about *working in the business rather than on the business*. It all adds up to the same thing, going to work every day with no real plan in mind and just dealing with things as they come. That can work to some degree in terms of your day-to-day operational issues. It doesn't work well with chronic problems, though, and it doesn't work at all with sales and marketing. The only alternative to a sales and marketing plan is to let your sales volume be governed by things completely outside of your control. Does that sound like a good idea?

Sure, it is possible to have a very good year when those things are moving in the right direction. I think experience has shown, though, that "those things" have a nasty tendency to go in the other direction.

Changing The Plan

I had a mid-course conversation with one of my clients this morning. Her sales and marketing plan for 2008 has three main goals: \$50,000 worth of deeper penetration of current accounts, another \$50,000 worth of new customers and \$30,000 of that sales volume increase coming from her new large format printer. Through the first five months of the year, she's at (approximately) \$14,000 from deeper penetration, \$7,000 from new customers and \$1500 from the large format printer.

At first glance, it probably looks like she's way behind on her goals, but let's take a closer look at her plan. Because we knew that it would take time to establish each of these programs, we build a series of quarterly benchmarks representing a pace we'd be happy with. For both penetration and new customers, the quarterly goals were \$5000 (1Q), \$10,000 (2Q), \$15,000 (3Q) and \$20,000 (4Q), so after the whole 1st Quarter and two-thirds of the 2nd Quarter, her benchmark against those goals was approximately \$11,667.

That means she was approximately \$2333 ahead of her penetration goal but approximately \$4667 behind her new customer goal. The first question we had to ask was whether her original goals were reasonable, and we both still felt they were. The next question was how to adjust her efforts to reach the new customer goal without losing momentum on the penetration program. What we decided was to increase the number of "prospecting starts" she would execute from 5 to 8 each week. (That's my term, by the way, for the set of activities which includes identifying a suspect company, then identifying the decision-maker, then sending an introductory letter or e-mail and then calling to follow up on that communication to try to set up a meeting.) To make time for all that, we considered reducing the number of penetration calls from 4 to 2 each week, but I was concerned that this would destroy her momentum. Instead, we decided that she would drop out of her BNI group, which had generated some early business when she joined it a year or so ago, but hadn't contributed anything to her business lately.

A New Tactic

The quarterly goals we'd established for the new large format printer were \$1000 (1Q), \$5,000 (2Q), \$9,000 (3Q) and \$15,000 (4Q), so after 5 months, her benchmark against those goals was approximately \$4333. With only about \$1500 in sales so far, she was running at barely a third of where she'd hoped to be. During these 5 months,

she had spoken with all of her 20-30 most significant customers about this new capability, and featured it on her website. Her feeling was that she'd get some orders from her major customers eventually, but they didn't have as much need for posters and banners as she thought they would.

We decided to reach out to her smaller customers using direct mail, and planned a series of 3 postcards to be mailed over the next 3 months. We also decided to create a "posters and banners" stuffer to go into invoices and packages. We also considered changing the graphics on her delivery van to feature posters and banners, but that one is on hold pending a decision on replacing that van.

Bottom Line

I hope you see that the bottom line here is to plan and then execute *and* to pay attention to how you're doing against your goals. When things are working the way you want them to, you continue to follow the plan. Sadly, a lot of printers lose sales momentum when some new business starts coming in. It's really a pretty simple equation. If sales activity generates new business, then a cessation of sales activity will eventually end the generation of new business. Far too many printers have ridden that roller coaster in the past.

If things are not working the way you want them to, you have to examine your plan. It might need a little tweaking—or possibly something more than just tweaking—either way, you have the opportunity to make mid-course corrections to get yourself back on track.