

More Business From Your Current Customers

There are really only two ways to grow a printing business. One is to gain new customers. The other is to increase the volume of business you do with the customers you've already got. I think most quick/digital/small commercial printers would agree that the latter is usually easier than the former.

What's sad, though, is that few printers really work at the opportunity to grow their current customers. Oh sure, you work hard at providing a level of quality and service that will keep them coming back, and some of you send out monthly mailers to "keep your name in front of your customers," but is that the same as really working at developing your customers?

I don't think so, but I hope you'll treat that as good news. If you're not doing much right now to actively seek out new opportunities with current customers, you have an enormous growth opportunity sitting right in front of you!

OK, how do you take advantage of this opportunity? As a starting point, you should recognize that you have two main avenues for growth with your current customers. I call them *product opportunities* and *people opportunities*.

Product Opportunities

How do you define your product offering? Hopefully not with some vague statement about "anything that involves ink and paper." (I wrote about this not too long ago in a column titled "Your Product Line, Your Strike Zone, and Your Selling Proposition" *QP*, July 2006.) A better understanding is that you sell business and personal stationery, business forms, brochures, manuals, posters, design services, mailing services, newsletters, invitations, etc. Those are the terms your customers would use to describe what they buy from you, and one of the fundamentals of effective selling is to speak the same language your customers speak.

Here's what I recommend. Make a horizontal list of the specific products and services you sell, and combine it with a vertical list of your Top 50 customers. Then evaluate each customer's "coverage" of your product line by checking off the items they buy from you. The next step is to go talk to them about the items they don't buy from you. The next step after that is to continue the evaluation and conversation process with customers 51-100, and so on.

The "typical" printing salesperson would approach this differently. He/she would "call on" a customer and ask "what other printing do you buy?" Here's the problem with that approach. Are checks printing? How about posters? We know they are, but do your customers know they are? The answer is that vague questions usually get imperfect answers, and imperfect answers can cost you a lot of opportunity!

If I had a customer who bought a lot of stationery from me, but never any business forms, I would get myself in front of that customer and ask some specific questions. "I've been looking back over your purchase history," I might say, "and I noted that you've bought a lot of letterhead, envelopes and business cards from me, but you've never bought any sort of business forms. What sort of forms do you use? Invoices? Statements? Checks? Personnel forms? Were you aware that we print a lot of that sort of thing for other customers?"

The answer may be "No, we don't use any of that sort of thing." It might also be "Sure, we use a lot of forms, but we're really happy with the supplier we buy them from." But it might also be "No, I wasn't aware that I could be buying that sort of thing from you. And in fact, I need to place an order for one of my forms right now!"

Bottom line: If you think your customers know your product line as well as you do, you're kidding yourself and costing yourself opportunities.

People Opportunities

Another "typical" printing sales strategy is to ask a customer "who else here orders printing?" Again, that's a vague question that's likely to get an imperfect answer. And a good rule of thumb is that the bigger a company is, the less likely the right hand will know what the left hand is doing.

A better approach is to recognize that specific functions within a business or organization have specific printing needs. The Human Resources function, for example, has needs that include personnel forms, employee manuals, benefits booklets, posters, banners, and newsletters. If you're doing business with a company with a few hundred employees, it's pretty likely that there's a significant amount of HR printing being purchased. If you're not getting any of that business, the main problem may be that you're not talking with the person who orders it!

If I were in that situation, I would get myself in front of my current contact within that company and ask: "Who's in charge of Human Resources?" (By the way, this would qualify as asking for a referral, and I learned a long time ago that there's something even better than a referral—an introduction! So my next question would be: "Would you be

willing or able to walk me over there and introduce me, or maybe give him/her a call or send out a quick e-mail to let him/her know that I'm going to be calling?")

Combined Opportunity

I've been talking with several of my own clients recently about sort of a combined opportunity, dealing with both products and people—and online ordering capability! These conversations grew out of a common complaint: "We have this great capability but we can't get our customers to buy into it." The problem, I think, is that many printers are trying to sell this capability to the wrong people.

Certainly one perceived benefit of online ordering is the convenience, but for many established customers, the "old-fashioned way" works just fine. If it ain't broke, they don't want to fix it. So let's take a step beyond convenience, to where the real value for a large company can be found—cost control and image control.

If you want to be really successful selling online ordering of business cards to large companies, you have to identify two individuals within the organization. I call one the "keeper of the corporate image" and the other the "watcher of the corporate pennies." The former may be in the marketing department, or somewhere within the executive ranks. The latter is probably *not* in the purchasing department, but more likely someone the purchasing department reports to. The KCI is the person who really cares about quality and consistency of image. The WCP is the person who really cares about lowering overall cost, not just the price of each individual print job.

Are you talking to those people right now? If not, the people you *are* talking to are your most likely conduit to the real decision-makers.