

Not-So-Random Thoughts

This is another one of those months where I want to catch up on a few not-so-random thoughts which don't justify an entire column, but will (hopefully) have some value to you anyway. The menu this month includes some thoughts on sales culture, personalization and having a "unique selling proposition."

Sales Culture

I went to the movies a few weekends ago, and one of the "coming attractions" trailers was for a film titled "The Goods: Live Hard, Sell Hard." It's one of those comedy/love story movies where the flawed "hero" has to change his ways in order to win the girl. The "hero" is a car salesman, and from the trailer, he looks like everyone's worst salesjerk nightmare.

That got me thinking that there are really two distinct "sales cultures"—one is all about the customer, and the other is all about making the sale. The latter is probably the most appropriate culture for car salespeople, because most of the data collected by that industry suggests that if the customer leaves the lot without buying, he/she is probably not coming back. That's why they work so hard to draw out the process—the looking stage, the test-drive stage, and most importantly, the negotiation stage. If you've been through the process recently, you're probably still exhausted from the sheer effort involved.

I think the printing sale is a lot different, though. It's more about *need* than about *want*, and it's really much more about an ongoing customer relationship. Sure, the car guys want you back when it's time to buy your next car, but when will that happen, and how many times have you actually found the same salesperson at the same dealership when it was time for your next car? A printing salesperson should be talking to people who have frequent and regular printing needs, and he/she should expect it to take a while to establish a relationship.

Here's the bottom line on all of this. When I see car sales on the resume of anyone I'm interviewing for a printing sales position, I always ask them if they liked selling cars and if they were good at it. If the answer is yes and yes, I disqualify them—because they're not from the sales culture that I want representing my client's company!

Personalization

The "hot trend" in direct mail these days seems to be putting the recipient's first name in lights—or on a sign, or a balloon, or written in sand—on the front side of a mailer. This is undeniably cool, but here's the important issue: are these "creatively personalized" mailers really generating significantly higher response rates? From everything I hear, the answer is *no*. And the result is that many customers are not re-ordering and continuing with the programs.

Here's some advice, then: Stop promising the world! It is usually a good thing to under-promise and over-perform. It is usually a *very bad thing* to do the opposite. Stop talking about 25% response rates and start building more reasonable expectations and I think we'll all see more rapid acceptance—and continuation—of these advanced personalization capabilities. Right now, I think most of the sales effort is more car-like than customer-driven.

Here's something else to think about. *Personalization* is only part of the key to success in direct marketing, and in fact, it's the smaller part. The bigger part is the *demographics*—sending a personalized offer to a person who's likely to be interested in it! As printers pursue the transition from *print provider* to *marketing services provider*, the *demographics* component is the least understood but most important piece.

Personalization: Part 2

I got a call from a printing salesperson the other day, and he asked me to help him come up with a "killer" subject line for his prospecting e-mails. "I have to grab their attention," he said, "and I've been thinking about personalizing the subject line. For example, 'Marketing Ideas For David Fellman & Associates!' What do you think about that?"

"I'm not sure I'd open that one," was my answer. "I get a lot of spam that has my name of it. How about 'Printing/Marketing Ideas From (Your Name) at (Your Company Name)'?"

Here's my point—and I know that this flies in the face of everything you're being told about personalization!—but when the challenge is to get read, especially with e-mail, I think *where it's from* is more important to many people than *who it's to*.

Unique Selling Proposition

Here's my final not-so-random thought for today. There's a school of thought that says that you have to be unique in order to be successful in any kind of business today. The justification is that there's so much *noise* out there, that you have to be able to print or say or do something that no one else can print or say or do.

I am *not* a proponent of that theory, and one of the key reasons is that it's dangerous! I have written before that the most important factor in most people's buying decision is simply the matter of whether they trust the salesperson. OK, that's probably not as true when people buy cars as it is when they buy printing, but you don't sell cars, do you? You sell a custom manufactured product that doesn't exist until an order is placed and then produced—and there's a lot that can go wrong between those two points!

Since trust is paramount, I hope you'll see how dangerous it can be to claim to be unique when, in fact, you are not. I was out on a call just a few weeks ago with a salesperson who told her prospect that she had unique capabilities. "We're the only printer in this area with both in-house design and in-house mailing," she said.

"No you're not," the prospect said. "I'm pretty sure my current printer has both of those capabilities."

Was he right? Maybe a better question is *does it really matter?* If the buyer's *perception* is that the salesperson stretched the truth, then the damage is probably done.

Here's a more important point. All of that *noise* notwithstanding, it doesn't matter one bit whether a printer is unique. What matters is that the printer treats *the customer* as unique, and that works best when it starts at the earliest stages of prospecting. My advice is to be less concerned with telling them what you *do*—unique or not—and more concerned with learning what they *want* and *need*. The best position you could ask for is to identify their wants and needs and then be able to say *I can do that*.

In other words, don't *tell* them that you're unique, *show* them that you know that they're unique. I'm pretty sure you'll have better selling results with that strategy!