

Partnering Possibilities

Business “experts” love buzzwords, and one of the more popular business buzzwords during the last several years has been “partnering.” The subject of partnering was raised in the Q&A segment of one of my seminars recently, when one of the quick printers in attendance said: “I read a lot and hear a lot about the value and opportunities in partnering...but what does all that really mean to a small printing company like mine?”

I answered that partnering can mean a great deal to a quick printer—regardless of size—because partnering is an activity that concerns the two most basic elements of business...buying and selling.

“So when is it just buying?” the printer asked. “And when is it just selling? And when does it cross whatever line it is that makes it partnering?”

Unilateral Basis

I answered that question by pointing out that smart buying all by itself contains many of the elements of partnering on a more-or-less unilateral basis, because the smart buyer understands his/her own needs, researches various options to meet those needs, and ultimately gains real value from the product or service that is purchased.

Consultive selling also contains many of the elements of partnering on a unilateral basis, because a consultive salesperson determines his/her client’s exact needs, presents options to meet those needs, and provides real value in the product or service that is sold.

Finally, what is often referred to as “win-win” selling contains many of the elements of partnering on more of a shared basis, because the end result in a win-win situation is the right product at the right price—for both parties! In other words, in order to qualify as a win-win situation, the buyer and the seller must both agree on the value of the product or service.

So, does partnering occur whenever a smart buyer and a consultive salesperson come together in a “win-win” situation? Not always, because partnering is not always a tangible “thing.” What partnering really is at the most basic level—where a buyer and seller come together—is a way to think about the relationship. When both parties feel like they’re working in a satisfactory partnership, “partnering” has been achieved.

A partnering attitude can grow to become a way to *act* on a business relationship. In fact, it can grow to provide something like a set of standards that guide all parties in how they work together over a long period of time. But partnering starts at a much more basic—and selfish—level.

Individual Self Interest

Effective partnering begins with what I call ISI...Individual Self Interest. That may seem like contradiction—especially after talking about “win-win” situations—but it really isn’t. Every business decision you make should begin with the consideration of “what’s in it for me.”

Sometimes a partnering situation is triggered by something one of your customers needs—something that they either tell you about or you determine through a consultive sales process—but sometimes it’s even more basic and pro-active than that. I think the greatest potential of partnering for a quick printer comes when *you* decide what *you* want for *your own* business, and seek partnerships based on *your* needs and *your* considerations.

Remember, partnering concerns *both* buying and selling. And even though I think the greatest long-term benefits for a quick printer will be found on the selling side of the equation, it will probably be easiest to understand partnering if we look at it from your buying side.

Think about your own suppliers. What could they do to make your life easier? What could they do to help you to be more profitable? What could they do to make it easier for you to operate your company? What could they do to make it easier for you to sell to your own customers?

If the only thing you can think of is for your suppliers to lower their prices, you’re a long way from the true spirit of partnering. You’re also a long way from gaining any of the real benefits of partnering. Let’s switch back to the buying side of the equation for a moment. How would you like it I was a customer of yours, and I called you and said: *“I’d like to be more of a partner to you than just a customer. So what I want you to do is charge me less for the work you do for me.”* If I were a large enough customer you might feel like you’d have to say yes, but I don’t think you’d like it!

A Different Approach

What if I called you and said: *“I’d like to be more of a partner to you than just a customer, and I’m prepared to make a long-term commitment to buy from your company. I’m hoping, though, that you’ll be able to help me with a few things...not the least of which is to reduce the overall cost of my printing.”*

Do you see how that's a completely different situation? Reducing cost is not the same as lowering price! Now let's try a little exercise: please think about your two or three largest customers for just a minute, and see if you can write out a short list of three things each could change or do that would save them money on what they buy from you—without costing you any bottom line profit. Could they order in larger quantities? Could they use different paper stocks? Could they give you more lead time? (Remember, we're talking about *bottom line* profit here. There have been a few times in my own career when I offered customers lower prices in return for more lead time and ended up with a substantial increase in profit. Time is money in the printing business...especially when one customer's turnaround requirements keep you from performing satisfactorily for another client.)

Now, let's go back to the buying side of your equation. Think about your top two or three vendors, and see if you can make a list of three things that each of them could do to help you in some important way. Next comes the really interesting part...what would you be willing to do *for them* in order to make what you'd like them to do for you seem more attractive? That's when it starts to be partnering, not simply buying!

Attitude Is Key

The same approach applies to "selling side" partnering. I listened to a friend of mine make his partnering presentation to a prospect a few years ago, and this is basically what he said: *"I want to do business with you, and become an important part of your business over a long period of time. And in order to do that I'm willing to put pretty much everything on the table. I'll be honest with you, and that honesty starts with me telling you clearly that I want to make money out of our relationship. But I also think I might be able to save you time, money, and maybe even aggravation in terms of the overall value I'll provide, and if we can have an honest discussion of your needs, I think we'll at least find out if we can both get what we want out of a relationship."*

The prospect in this case seemed to like the idea of saving time, money and aggravation, and the discussion yielded several areas of possibility. This prospect eventually became a very good customer.

Negotiation

Unfortunately, I can't tell you that you'll always get everything you want out of a partnership. There will often—in fact, almost always—be some negotiation and some give-and-take required in order to make things work well enough for all parties. Your responsibility to your own business is to clearly understand the costs and considerations from your side. That tells you how far you can go in "giving" from your end. That helps you make sure that your partnering decisions are also intelligent business decisions.

And please think about this...in understanding your costs, I'm not just talking about knowing when you can't afford something. Many potentially great partnering opportunities go by the boards when people don't understand their costs well enough to realize that they *can* afford to do something. That's where an understanding of "time is money" might be important to you.

When a partnering opportunity does come down to the negotiating stage—and you're being asked for something that would not represent a good business decision for you—you might consider these "magic words" that I've had a lot of success with: *"I can't do that, but I can do this..."*

Remember, real partnering is not about "giving away the store." It's not about one-sided concessions any more than it's about taking advantage of customers. It is all about understanding what you want and what you need, and what your potential partner—customer, prospect, or vendor—wants and needs. That often involves some compromise, but compromising doesn't necessarily mean that the final result won't be good for your business!

Educational Partnerships

If I were you, a big part of what I'd want from a partnership with any vendor is education and training. That can range from education and training on the vendor's specific products to any sort of general education and training that might be helpful to my business. That, of course, is one of the benefits that franchisees get from their partnership with a franchisor...and independent quick printers can get from a membership/partnership with NAQP.

Some industry suppliers already offer this sort of educational partnership, and I think I'm involved in a pretty good example. ResourceNet International and the ResourceNet Express Paper & Graphics Stores around the country sponsor my *PRINTSELLING* and *Building Sales Inside The Printshop* seminars. Last year, ResourceNet helped to bring these inside and outside sales training programs to more than 20 cities, and I'm hoping that we'll increase that number in 1997.

ResourceNet is committed to the idea that better sales training will allow you to sell more printing—knowing that selling more printing means buying more paper, and hoping, of course, that you'll hold up your end of the partnership and buy that paper from them!

Are there similar opportunities for you to provide education and training to your customers? I'm not sure that offering sales training would be appropriate in your situation, but how about printing and graphics training? You may

already have first-hand knowledge of how much trouble print users are having in transferring digital files to their printers. How about teaching your customers—and prospects—how to do it right the first time.

If you have the right resources, you could offer a seminar on this subject. If you don't have the right resources internally, how about buying a copy of John Giles' great book, *The Digital Original*, for each of your Top 10 customers and each of your most important prospects. Then bring it in and say: *"Here's something that I think represents our interest in having a real partnership with your company. I'm here today to ask you what else we could do that would contribute to such a partnership. Then I also want to talk to you about a few things we would want from you in the partnership...starting with a (larger) share of your printing and copying business."*

Bottom Line

Not every vendor or customer will want to be your partner, and truthfully, I'm not sure you'll want that kind of relationship with every customer. Remember, there's responsibility involved in a partnering relationship, and there is a danger of spreading yourself too thin. I think the best idea initially is to identify just a few customers and/or prospects with whom a partnership presents the greatest potential benefits from both sides.

With the vendors, though, I suggest that you try to establish one solid partnering relationship in each category of product or service you buy. Not only will there be benefits to your "buying side," but you'll also be gaining experience with partnering that can help you later on the "selling side." And if any vendor is not interested in working with you, I would suggest that you should consider buying from someone else!