

Product Knowledge

My father retired a few years ago from the office products industry. That's a complicated business for a salesperson. In addition to all of the other challenges of selling, an office supplier's product knowledge requirement borders on the ridiculous.

Take a look at one of the big office supply catalogs if you want to know what I mean. There are something like 26,000 individual products listed in the one that's put out by United Stationers, one of the largest of the office products industry's wholesale suppliers.

My dad used to say that the most important thing he learned in 30 or so years in the industry was simply *where to look* for information on products his customers were interested in, or else products that he wanted to suggest as improvements over the way these people were doing business at the time.

Product Skills

A printer's "products" are quite a bit different than an office supplier's. Very nearly every print job I've ever been involved with qualified as a fully "custom" job, while a large percentage of the things my father sold came right off a shelf. Still, product knowledge is a very important part of what a printing salesperson brings to the table in the *partnership* between vendor and customer.

I told a story recently in an article for *Quick Printing* magazine about an interview with a highly experienced printing buyer. She told me that in 15 years of buying printing, she had learned two things as absolutes. The first, she said, was that there's always a lower price if that's all you care about. If you don't like the prices you're getting, just call more printers. The chances are very good that you'll find one who's willing to go lower than what you've got.

The second absolute, she told me, is that there's always a better way to do any job. She had a whole bunch of stories to tell me about times when a salesperson suggested a slightly different size, or layout, or paper stock, or color configuration. The result was either a lower cost, or a printed piece that looked better and ultimately worked better for her company.

It's the ability—and the willingness—to pass along that kind of knowledge that, for her, really sets one printer apart from another. I don't think she's a one-in-a-million printing buyer, either. She's price conscious, yes, but she's more than that...she's *value* conscious. And she made it very clear that she finds *value* in the knowledge she gains from the best of her printing salespeople.

Knowledge Requirement

That puts a burden on you to keep up your product knowledge, and that's almost certainly more difficult now than it ever has been before. We're undergoing major changes in almost all of the technologies of our industry right now, everything from pre-press technology to paper technology to the way the ink gets on the paper, and beyond that to such things as the way a recipient's name gets put on a piece you print that has to get where it's going through the mail.

The payoff comes, though, when you use that knowledge, when you bring it to bear to the benefit of your customer. You may not always be successful, but just *the attempt* to find a better way to execute a print job will often win you a few points from a prospect or customer. When your product knowledge allows you to come up with something substantial, you stand to gain a lot more points, and win a lot more jobs.

Voice Mail Revisited

A few months ago, I wrote about voice mail, and expressed my feeling that voice mail actually does a lot more good for a printing salesperson than it does harm. That's especially true, I said, when it comes to working with existing customers and managing live projects.

Voice mail gives you a terrific opportunity in your selling efforts too, though, and it all hinges around the capability of a voice mail system to receive and communicate a fairly long message. How many times have you heard someone's voice mail tell you to "leave a detailed message and take all the time you need."

If someone's giving you that opportunity, you're not taking advantage of it by simply leaving your name and phone number and asking for a callback. Take as much time as you need and tell this person *why* he or she should call you back.