

Purple Cows Revisited

I had the pleasure of hearing Seth Godin speak recently, at *Selling Power Magazine's* 2010 Leadership Conference. Godin is the author of 12 books, including *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Becoming Remarkable*, which I mentioned in a *QP* column back in 2004. Some of his other titles include *Meatball Sundae*, *Free Prize Inside*, and *All Marketers Are Liars Tell Stories*. As you might guess from the titles, Seth's a funny guy.

He's also a serious guy, and he had some things to say about business—and specifically about the printing business—that are worth passing along.

Race To The Bottom

"I do a fair amount of business with commercial printing companies," Godin said, "and they have trained me to believe that they're all the same, and that 'I can make it for you cheaper' is the major differentiating factor."

How does a printing company "train" its customers in this way? Mostly by focusing on price, rather than on value. Do you do that? Yes, I'm pretty sure that you do.

What did you say the last time you called to follow up on a quote? I'm betting that it was not "*do you see all of the value in our proposal?*" Instead, I think you probably said something like "*how does our pricing look?*" If you did take the value route, I apologize and I'm proud of you, but I can tell you that the majority of printers and salespeople I work with are talking more about price than value—at least until I teach them how to do it differently!

Godin calls this "the race to the bottom", and I think that expression is very apt. It's been proven in the marketplace that you can win orders with low pricing, but it hasn't been proven that you can win customer loyalty that way. More importantly, it hasn't been proven that you can be profitable with the combination of low prices and low loyalty. In some businesses maybe, but not in the printing business. Winning the race to the bottom would be a very hollow victory. I'd rather see you competing in the race to the top.

Ideas That Spread

Another of Godin's serious comments was that "ideas that spread, win." He was talking about the difference between traditional advertising and the sort of multi-media, multi-channel communications opportunities we have today. There are certainly more ways to get your ideas out into the marketplace than ever before, but there's still a fundamental issue here: What "ideas" do you want to spread?

Think about that. What "ideas" can help you win the race to the top? Here are a few suggestions:

- We are really good at the "craft" of printing.
- We have also mastered the new technology that broadens our craft.
- We continue to work at that mastery, because things are still changing.
- We do all of this because we believe it makes us valuable to you.
- We have also become experts at marketing strategy and technique.
- We think we can help you to grow your business, not just by printing for you, but by guiding you toward what to print and how to get it in front of your target market.
- We think we can help you to grow your business through marketing strategies that go well beyond print, using all of the power of the Internet.
- We really want to work with you!

I hope you see the "progression" in these ideas. Taken individually, they each represent only a piece of your overall value proposition. Added together, I think they tell a pretty compelling story. I hope you also make the connection to the vision of a Marketing Services Provider that I've been writing about for the last three months.

OK, now we come to the big question. How do you spread these ideas? The answer is, in every way possible—*consistently* and in every way possible. This is what your direct mail should say. This is what your website should say. This is what you tweets should say, and what your Facebook page should say, and what you should say every time you talk with a friend, neighbor, supplier, potential supplier, suspect, prospect or customer.

In truth, Godin probably puts more stock in Twitter and Facebook than I do, and I'll come back to that in a moment. He and I agree, though, that ideas that spread have the best chance of winning.

The Buying Revolution

Godin—and others on the program—made reference to the “buying revolution” that seems to be going on. One of the other speakers even said that “sales is over, and salespeople are unnecessary.” His point was that buyers don’t need salespeople anymore to tell them about products. They will find what they need—from product information to sources of supply all the way to pricing and placing their order—on the Internet, and they’ll do it at their own pace and according to their own agendas.

I’m not quite sure what this guy was doing on the program, unless it was to reinforce the message that you have to make your sales process relevant to whatever buying process is in place. I don’t think sales is over at all, though, and especially not in our industry. That’s because we are not selling a *product*. What we’re really selling is that progression of ideas we just discussed.

I can buy a book without a salesperson involved, either at Barnes & Noble or barnesandnoble.com. I can buy food, clothing and shelter without ever talking to a human being. (In case you’re wondering about *shelter*, what I mean is that I make all of my hotel reservations online these days.)

OK, I can buy printing online too, but only up to a point. I might trust a business card order to VistaPrint, but I’m not going to trust them on something really complex. And I’m certainly not going to go to them for marketing advice. Printers sell something that lends itself to being sold, and I think that was my most important take-away from the *Selling Power* conference. If it’s easy to buy, it can easily be bought online, and a company’s selling process has to recognize that. If it’s harder to buy, a professional salesperson can be a significant benefit in the what-to-buy-and-who-to-buy-from equation.

Twitter and Facebook

I’ve gotten a few e-mails from printers and salespeople who, like Seth Godin, put more stock in Twitter and Facebook than I do. As I wrote a few months ago, though, I’m not against using these media in your sales and marketing efforts, I’m just against wasting time. I still believe that most of the time being spent in these media represent a marginal-at-best investment.

Having said that, I recent set up a Facebook Fan Page for my *Sell More Printing* book. Check it out!

