

Satisfaction Guaranteed

My wife bought a CD yesterday titled “40 Licks”—a newly-released greatest hits anthology by the Rolling Stones. I’m sure that none of you Aging Boomers will be surprised to hear that Satisfaction (as in, I Can’t Get No) is one of the songs on the CD. I was ironic for me to be hearing that song not long after reading a thread on PrintOwners about “It’s On Time Or It’s Free” guarantees.

The guarantee of satisfaction can be a very powerful selling tool for a quick/digital/small commercial printer, but from the comments on PrintOwners, it was apparent that some printers don’t have a clue about how a guarantee can work for them. It seemed to me that half of the respondents were more concerned with being “trapped” by a guarantee, and not nearly interested enough in the positive potential of a guarantee strategy.

Starting Point

As a starting point to this discussion, let understand that all of you guarantee your work. There are two fundamental kinds of guarantees in the world: explicit and implicit. An explicit guarantee is when you put it right out there in front of your customer or potential customer—in writing, or by actually speaking the words. If you say “It’ll be done right, and it’ll be done on time, or it’ll be free,” I’m sure you’ll agree that’s a pretty explicit guarantee.

The key point at this stage of our discussion is that an implicit guarantee is really just as binding as an explicit one, and I think I can prove that to you. Here’s the scenario: I buy something from you and I’m not satisfied with your quality and/or service, so I don’t pay you until I am satisfied. Would you agree that you’re at pretty much the same place in terms of what you’d consider to be a successful transaction?

To me, it’s not a very long stretch from an implicit guarantee to an explicit guarantee, and I’d like to see you make that stretch. Because a strong guarantee really can go a long way toward reducing the risk your customer or prospect feels. I’ve heard the term “buyer’s remorse” to describe the situation where someone starts worrying after making a purchase, but I think a term that’s more appropriate to a printer’s situation would be “buyer’s pre-morse.” Face it, just about everyone who’s purchased a significant amount of printing in their lives has been disappointed by a printer at least once, and many of those who haven’t suffered yet have at least heard the stories. As I’ve said many times before, just about every job that comes into a printshop is an accident looking for a place to happen, and Murphy’s Law runs wild in our industry. You know it, and many of your customers and prospects know it, and they’re aware of the risk they’re taking every time they send you a job.

Here’s something else to think about. Many people talk about how they hate salespeople, but it’s not really hate that most of them feel. It’s fear! The underlying emotion for many people who buy things is the fear that some salesperson will talk them into buying something that won’t work, or won’t provide the satisfaction they’re hoping for. I hope you’ll agree that a strong, explicit guarantee can be a very effective fear-fighter!

Who Decides?

The starting point for the PrintOwners discussion was the question of who decides if a job is delivered on time, the printer or the customer. To me, there’s no question at all about this. The printer is in complete control of setting the delivery commitment, and from that point, it’s either on time or it’s not!

I wrote about this just a couple of months ago, in a column titled “The Top 3 Ways To Lose Customers.” I said then that if you’re smart, you’ll never tell a customer that they’ll have their job on some specific day based on your “normal” turnaround time. What you’ll do instead is ask them “When do you need this?” If the answer is something longer than your normal turnaround time, you can be probably be pretty confident in saying “We can do that,” and if it turns out that you can deliver the job sooner, you’ve set up a situation where you’ve under-promised and then over-performed.

If their deadline is the same as your normal turnaround time, you say essentially the same thing but with one important addition. “We should be able to do that,” you say. “But if it comes down to needing another day or so, would that still be OK?” The extra day or so may not always be there, but if it is, you want it! You then commit to the delivery—or not!—based on your confidence in your ability to make it happen within the specified time.

If their deadline is shorter than your normal turnaround time, you say “I’ll have to check our production schedule to make sure we can meet your deadline, and I’ll get back to you as soon as I do that.” Again, you commit to the delivery—or not!—based on your confidence in your ability to make it happen within the specified time.

It really comes down to making it clear that your “It’s On Time Or It’s Free” guarantee is contingent on an *agreement* between both parties as to when the job will be delivered. In other words, they can tell you when they want/need it, but that delivery commitment is not guaranteed unless you say “yes, we will do that.” You can always

pass on a project that you think might get you into trouble, and that's all the protection I think a printer should want or need.

By the way, please remember that a guarantee like this doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing proposition. I would have no problem with you telling me that you simply can't guarantee your ability to meet my delivery wants or needs on a particular job. "We're willing to try our best for you," you might say, "but I can't guarantee that we can finish this job within that timeframe." I might then have to look for a printer who could meet my deadline, but I still might come back to you if I couldn't find one. And don't forget the possibility that I might find another printer who would promise but not deliver! Your honestly would probably look pretty good in a situation like that.

(By the way, that's an example of why you should always follow up on any project that you lose because of a deadline you couldn't meet. "I feel very bad about what happened to you," you might be able to say, "especially considering that I could have gotten the job to you as fast as they did. But it turned out that we both lost out because that other printer lied!")

Fear Fighters

Let's go back to the idea that a strong, explicit guarantee can be a very effective fear-fighter. Given the knowledge that things could go wrong, one of the things the printing buyer wants is to know that he/she is protected in case Murphy's Law does rear its ugly head. The other important thing he/she wants is some reason to believe that it's unlikely to happen! This is where your quality control standards and procedures join in with your guarantee to provide two layers of protection! Remember, though, that those quality control standards and procedures have to be communicated—explicitly!—along with your guarantee in order to get the maximum selling value from them.

If I were you, I might even embrace that "two layers of protection" theme in my marketing materials. "We provide you with two solid layers of protection against quality or service failures," you might say. "First of all, our quality control standards and procedures ensure that every aspect of your project is checked and then double-checked—by highly trained and highly motivated printing industry professionals! Second, we guarantee that we'll meet our delivery commitments, and if we don't, the only invoice you'll see for that job will say 'No Charge!'"

(Please note that you're still not saying that you'll meet *their* delivery wants/needs, only that you'll meet *your* delivery commitments. It still sounds pretty compelling, though, doesn't it? And you still have the opportunity to pass on any commitment that you think will get you into trouble.)

A Sign Of Weakness?

One of the PrintOwners posters expressed the opinion that an "It's On Time Or It's Free" guarantee was a sign of weakness. That one amazed me, because I look at a strong, explicit guarantee as an absolute sign of strength. On one hand, you're saying "Look how much confidence we have in our ability to meet our commitments. We're sticking our neck out pretty far to support our confidence that we can do exactly what we tell you we will do." And beyond that, you're accepting at least a portion of the cost of any failure to perform.

Granted, a missed delivery might carry a cost that goes far beyond the cost of the print job. (For example, having to go to a trade show without necessary printed materials.) But you still go a long way in building confidence and fighting fear when you guarantee a customer or prospect that they're not the only ones who will suffer if you screw up!

And that's probably the real bottom line. Anyone can talk about quality and service, but not everyone will deliver what—or when!—they promise. If there's no accountability for not keeping promises, it makes it a lot more likely that promises won't be kept. And sure, the potential for losing future business is a good reason for a printer to keep his/her quality and service promises, but from the customer's perspective, there's not all that much comfort in punishing a printer in the future. The real comfort is in knowing that you're accountable to them right now!

A Final Thought

We've been talking mostly about service failures so far, but I think I need to close with a comment about quality failures. If that happens, I think your guarantee obligation is to reprint the job immediately at no cost to the customer. Now, I'll grant you that there are situations where the quality issues are not clear-cut, or where the customer has some responsibility for the failure. Those situations have to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis, and part of your consideration has to be how much you want to continue to do business with the customer. But there are other situations where the quality failure is without question your responsibility, and that's the situation I'm talking about here.

The only two options should be an immediate reprint, or an invoice that says "No Charge"—and the immediate reprint would be my preferred strategy. If you show a customer that you can get it wrong, I think your best chance of protecting and prolonging the relationship is to quickly show them that you can get it right!