

## Scattered (Sales & Marketing) Thoughts

It's getting to be summertime in the quick/digital/small commercial segment of the printing industry—at least here in North America. I've been on the phone recently with some of my Southern Hemisphere clients in Australia and New Zealand, and I was reminded just last night that it's getting to be wintertime “down under.”

It might be the combination of longer days and shorter nights that's been leaving me with scattered thoughts recently. Between the natural tendency to do more outdoor things in the evening during the summer, and the fact that the time difference between here and Australia and New Zealand usually means that my conversations with those clients take place after midnight here, I'm not getting as much sleep as I'm used to!

That's OK, though, because I've just got a few scattered sales and marketing thoughts to write about today.

### “We're Under Contract”

The “contract objection” has come up for a number of my clients recently, the one where a prospect tells a salesperson that “we're under contract” to some other printing company for all of our printing. My clients have been asking me how to deal with this objection.

First of all, it's been my experience that there are very few actual written contracts between printing buyers and sellers, especially in the quick/digital/small commercial segment. More often than not, I think, this objection is really just an attempt to push the salesperson away, and that in itself should tell a salesperson something about the real quality of the prospect. Remember, successful prospecting is all about finding people who do want to talk to you, not spending a lot of time worrying about those who don't!

The fact remains, though, that some of those people buy a lot of printing, so the typical salesperson doesn't want to give up too soon. If that's your situation, here's how I suggest you address the objection.

“The essence of a contract,” I would say, “is that you agree to do something in order to get something in return. What is it exactly that you get from this contract?” Assuming that there is a real contract in place in the first place, what they get will probably include some combination of quality, service and price.

“So in return,” I would say, “you commit to buying all of your printed materials from this company. Well, let me ask you this, I would guess that you're getting the price that you contracted for, but are you getting all the rest of it, the quality and service?”

If the answer to this question is yes, you're in trouble. Contract or not, you're dealing with a satisfactory buyer-seller relationship. But if the honest answer is no, you at least have something to work with. “Here's what I suggest,” I would say. “I'm very confident that we can give you the quality and service you want, and I have quite a bit of evidence to support that statement. As for price, let's take a look at our prices compared to theirs, and even if we turn out to be a little higher, I hope you'll consider that of the three things you're supposed to be getting—quality, service and price—you're only getting one of those from the other people and I think we'll be able to give you at least two!”

One of my sales coaching clients made that case to a prospect last week, and the prospect replied that even though he'd been waiting for two months for his letterhead order to be delivered, he still couldn't buy from anyone else because of the contract. “What do I do now?” my client asked.

Here what I suggested: “Go back to him and ask him to consider that the other printer has already broken the contract. He was promised quality, service and price and he's not getting it! And then tell him that we're not going to ask him for any other commitment than to buy from us as long as we're giving him everything we promised!”

This is a situation, by the way, where my client only wants a portion of the prospect's business. The contract includes a lot of complicated forms work, and she'd just as soon leave all that to the other supplier, a business forms specialist. So I also asked my client to consider—and to ask her prospect to consider—what that other supplier is likely to do if he loses part of the business. Will he raise his prices on the forms work that he stands to keep? I doubt it! The most likely scenario is that the other supplier will honor his prices to try to save the business he hasn't lost, and that eliminates both any need for the prospect to keep on buying from the other supplier, and the prospect's key objection to buying from my client.

### “We Provide Solutions”

I'm tired of hearing everyone who sells anything talking about “solutions.” Yes, it's true that I myself have written that the essence of consultive selling is to identify the prospect's problems and offer solutions, but most of the salespeople who irritate me aren't putting in the effort to identifying the problems. They are really just making

presentations—“we provide printing and copying solutions”—and leaving it up to the prospects to decide if they have printing and copying problems.

C'mon, now, lets do this right. Ask what works well in their current dealings with printing and printing companies. Then ask about what doesn't work as well. Once you identify a problem, make sure that your prospect understands that he/she has a problem. After you've done all of that, then it's time to start talking about a solution. Not before!

### **A “Unique Selling Proposition”**

Consultant-types love buzzwords, and one of the most popular concepts among sales & marketing consultants over the last few years has been to “identify and promote your unique selling proposition.” The idea is that you have to be unique in order to stand out in the marketplace and succeed.

I appreciate the concept, but I find it lacks something in application. What, after all, would make any one quick/digital/small commercial printer truly unique in his/her marketplace? You may have different equipment than your competitors, but you still have basically the same capabilities. Ink on paper. Toner on paper. Fast turn-around. Design and prepress. Bend, fold, staple and (hopefully not) mutilate. Free pickup and delivery.

The combination of printing and mailing services under one roof used to be fairly unique in our segment of the printing industry, but it's not all that unique any more. Granted, you and your employees are unique as individuals, but that doesn't really help you with prospects until they start getting to know you as individuals. (In other words, it has more bearing on why customers stay with you than it does on prospects becoming customers.)

The bottom line is this: Is any prospect really likely to believe you when you tell them you're completely unique, and therefore the best printer in town? Remember, none of your competitors are marketing themselves as the worst printer in town!

The good news is that you don't really need to be unique in order to stand out in the crowd. On the other hand, though, you can't just be ordinary. The strategy I recommend is to position yourself as one of the “top tier” of printers in your area.

“There are a lot of printers around here,” you might say, “but I think most of the really knowledgeable people in the area would tell you that there are three or four or five who really stand out in the crowd—known for consistently superior quality, a very high level of service, and pricing that, while it's usually not the lowest in the marketplace, certainly does reflect a very solid value. That's where we fit. I wouldn't try to tell you that we're the absolute best out of all of the printers in the area, but we're certainly in the top tier!”

If you can make that sale, you'll have separated yourself—and your pricing!—from the majority of your competitors. And while I'll grant you that there will still be people who couldn't care less—who want to buy from lower tier printers to get lower tier prices—there are also people who will only buy from the top tier. And isn't it true that those people tend to be profitable customers?

### **Meet “The Money-Spender”**

Two of my most-often-used buzzwords over the years have been “gatekeeper” and “decision-maker.” The gatekeeper is usually a secretary or receptionist who guards access to the decision-maker, and as I have pointed out many times, the gatekeeper can either be a salesperson's best friend or worst enemy, largely depending on the technique the salesperson uses in his/her initial approach. The strategy I teach is to do research with the gatekeeper, to find out who buys the printing and whatever you can about what sort of printing he/she buys, never to simply walk in or call in and say: “Can I talk to the person who buys the printing here?”

The decision-maker is the key person in the process that turns a prospect into a customer. But sometimes, after that decision has been made, the original decision-maker becomes a minor player in the ongoing relationship. The new key player is the person we might call the “money-spender.” This is the person who places the orders, and who handles the project-to-project dealings with you.

Sometimes the same person is both the decision-maker and the money-spender, but that's not always the case. It's very important that you understand the role each player plays in the buying decision. I do an exercise in seminars where I ask each attendee to write down the name of his/her best customer, and then I ask a few people to name their best customer. It's interesting that some people won't actually name the customer—because at many of the seminars I teach, their competitors are in the room too!—but the answer I get is usually either the name of a company or a description of a type of company (a manufacturing company, a hospital, an association, etc.). That gives me the opportunity to say: “You're wrong!”

The point I'm trying to make is this. Your customers are not companies or organizations; your customers are the people within those companies or organizations who trust you to handle their printing. At the most basic level, your customer is the money-spender!