

Shut Up And Sell

Most salespeople talk too much. That seems to be especially true of quick/digital/small commercial printing salespeople. In all fairness, that may be mostly a reflection of the relative youth of our industry's salesforce, and the fact that most young and/or inexperienced salespeople don't really know any better. Even if it's explainable, though, too much talking is still a major obstacle to sales success, so let's see if we can do something about it!

80/20 Application

As a starting point, let's consider this application of the 80/20 rule: 80% of all people would rather talk than listen, and only 20% of those people really listen when someone else is talking. We're a pretty self-centered species under the best of circumstances, and the selling situation is further complicated by the individual self interests of the two parties—the seller and the buyer. It's not just friendly conversation, in other words, because there's money involved!

You might think that would make the buyer listen closely, and the truth is that many buyers try. But the sheer volume of statements and promises that most salespeople call a "presentation" pretty quickly overwhelms most buyers, so they start listening defensively, or tune out altogether.

I'm sure you've found yourself listening defensively. That's when you start focusing on the things you don't like or believe. "Our product will make your life easier," says the salesperson. "Maybe someone else's life," says that little voice in your head. "My life is different, much more complicated than everyone else's."

I'm sure you've also found yourself tuning out. "Our product has a spin ratio of 14:1, a flux capacity of 3000, a 610 hour service cycle and it comes in red, yellow, green, black and brown," says the salesperson. "I need to check up on that brochure for ABC Company," says that little voice in your head, "and I need to make sure we've ordered paper and ink and toner and maybe get myself a cup of coffee."

If these things happen to you, you have to expect that they happen to others—specifically the people you and/or your salespeople are trying to sell to. I hope you'll realize that it's critically important to keep your prospects and customers engaged, and that just doesn't happen when a salesperson dominates the conversation.

Guide And Listen

It's a much better strategy to try to *guide* a selling conversation with questions, or perhaps statements and questions in combination. Here's an example: "What I'm hoping to accomplish today is to ask you a bunch of questions about your printing needs, and about your printing experiences. How does that sound to you?"

Obviously, that statement/question combination is appropriate to the very beginning of a first conversation with a prospect. Also obviously, it requires only a short answer—hopefully positive! Even a short answer, though, gets the prospect involved in the conversation, and when you do this right, you can transition your prospect to longer answers.

"We have pretty broad capabilities," you might say next, "ranging from design to printing and even to mailing services. Just in terms of printing, we have capabilities that range from very short run digital printing to short to medium run offset printing. Does any of that jump right out and say 'Oh yeah, I have needs that include that?'"

If the answer is positive, you could say: "Please tell me more" and your conversation will likely be off and rolling. And even if the answer to this specific question is not positive, your follow up can be: "Well, please tell me all about the printing you do buy." Either way, you've taken yourself out of "presentation mode" and hopefully into "listening mode"—which is where you're most likely to find real opportunity!

Remember that opportunity for a printing salesperson is not defined solely by how much printing a prospect or customer buys. It's also defined by any difficulty he/she has had in buying that printing in the past. "We're happy with our current supplier" is one of the most common objections printing salespeople hear, and when that's actually true, a salesperson is facing a steep uphill battle to displace that current supplier.

Here's another thought on listening. Perhaps the best way to focus on what a prospect or customer is saying is to take notes, and that provides three additional benefits. First of all, the notes back up your memory of the conversation. Second, I've been told by many printing buyers that a salesperson who takes notes gives them confidence. And finally, when you're concentrating on listening and taking notes, you're less likely to talk too much and ruin the whole conversation!

Courage To Question

I wrote about “courage to question” a few months ago (Have Courage, *QP*, November 2004), and I coined that term to describe the willingness to ask provocative questions, and to demand answers. The “demand” part apparently threw a few people, because I got calls and e-mails questioning whether a salesperson has the right to “demand” anything in a selling situation.

It was never my intention for you to stomp your feet and say “I demand an answer!” What I really meant was for you not to let your prospects and customers off the hook by filling the silence that often follows a provocative question. Give them time to think and answer, and let your silence force them to answer. Most salespeople seem to be more uncomfortable with silence than their counterparts, so they jump right and fill it up, often losing the opportunity to learn something important!

Here’s another thought on questioning strategy. Try not to preface your questions with the words “I don’t know if” because it often turns them into statements. For example: “I don’t know if it would be valuable to have a printer who could also handle your mailing, but we can do that.” It’s much better strategy to ask a question—“Would it be valuable to have a printer who could also handle your mailing?”—and then if the answer is positive, you can say “We can do that!”

“I don’t know” is an expression of ignorance. Why introduce that into your selling? “We can do that” is an expression of confidence, and better still, it’s *relevant* confidence when you’ve already established that this is something your prospect or customer is interested in! What if they’re not interested? Then move on to something else!

Final Thought

Here’s a final thought for today. It occurred to me as I was writing this that “shut up and sell” has another application in today’s quick/digital/small commercial printing marketplace. We have a lot of reluctant salespeople in our industry, many of whom spend quite a bit of time “talking around” the necessity of getting out and making sales calls. Remember the Nike “Just Do It” commercials? In this application, that’s just a nicer way of saying “shut up and sell!”