

Stages Of The Game

For the last couple of months, I've been writing on the theme that selling is a game. I've been having fun with the theme, and it seems to be having some impact on readers, because I've been receiving a greater than normal number of e-mails and phone calls with questions and comments on these articles. One e-mail that came in this morning was especially interesting, because it connected the "selling game" theme with something else I've written on in the past, ACT contact management software. The new version of this software—ACT 2000—has a component that lets you assign your prospects to various "stages of the sale," and the e-mail wondered if I'd seen it, and if I had any thought on specific "stages" of the printing sale.

Coincidentally, my ACT tasklist tells me that today is the day I need to write my next QP column, so thank you Debbie for giving me the idea for this month's topic.

Innings? Quarters? Stages?

As I thought about how to structure this article, the first challenge I faced was to choose a sport or game to compare this aspect of the selling game to. Three periods or four quarters didn't give me enough "stages" to work with, and I was worried at first that nine innings might give me too many. Then I remembered a sport where they actually use the term "stages"—bicycle racing, specifically long-distance bike races like the Tour d' France. So hop on your ten-speed, because we're about to pedal through the stages of the Tour d' Printing Sales!

First Stage

The first stage of the selling game is a preparation stage, and in fact, it might be more correct to call it a pre-preparation stage. The first thing many salespeople have to do is find the motivation to go out and prospect for new business.

But wait, you might ask, shouldn't every quick/digital/small commercial printing salesperson understand that seeking out new business is part of the basic job description? Should? Yes. Does? Unfortunately, no. And if you're willing to take a hard look at this situation with me, the reality is that much of the problem here is with printshop owners who simply aren't doing a very good job as sales managers. Experience has shown that it's not very reasonable to expect the sort of people who make up our industry's salesforce to be capable of motivating themselves to the level that is required.

Please consider who we're dealing with, young people without a great deal of real-world working experience, and older people whose compensation expectations are modest enough that they'll take a selling job at what a quick/digital/small commercial printer will be willing/able to pay. I don't mean to disrespect our industry or any of its salespeople, but you have to understand that simple economic factors draw the true superstars of the selling game toward situations where they can make far more money than it's reasonable to expect from a career in quick/digital/small commercial printing sales.

That doesn't mean that you can't have an effective outside salesperson. All it means is that you can't expect most quick/digital/small commercial printing salespeople to be "self starters" who will motivate themselves. You have to provide motivation, and you have to reinforce that motivation through accountability.

I'll write more about motivating high performance from your "sales athlete" in the next column in this series.

Stages 2-3

Once the motivation to get started is present, the next stage of the game is to identify some "suspects." As I've written before, a printing salesperson will deal with three kinds of people during the prospecting stages of the selling game: suspects, prospects and customers. The way this works is that they are suspects when a salesperson *thinks* they might be prospects. They are only prospects when he/she *knows* that they are prospects. And they only become customers when they develop a buying habit, which to me means that they start to think of you as their printer, not just a company which has a salesperson calling on them who they've tried out, but never gone back to.

A Stage 2 suspect can be any company which looks good from the outside; in other words, it looks like they'll have a need for the kind of printing/copying you sell, and it looks like that need will be large enough to make it worth a salesperson's while to pursue them. That takes us to Stage 3, which has two distinct parts: Stage 3A is to take a step forward toward "qualifying" the prospect, and Stage 3B is to identify the decision-maker. In practice, both of these objectives can be accomplished at the same time by talking with the "gatekeeper"—often a secretary

or receptionist, and best defined as the first person you come in contact with when you call or visit a suspect company.

The gatekeeper can usually tell you who you'll ultimately have to sell to, and if you approach this person in the right way, he/she can also usually tell you things that will help you to qualify the company. I like to ask these three questions: (1) What can you tell me about the kind of printing/copying that's involved in the operation of this company? (2) What can you tell me about the quantity of printing that your company buys? (3) Who is/are the printer(s) that your company is already doing business with?

The last of those questions is probably the most important of the three. The answer can tell you a great deal about how well this company might match both your capabilities and your attitudes. Let's say that the company is already doing business with a printer very much like you in terms of equipment and capabilities. That's a pretty good indication that they're buying the kind of printing/copying you want to sell. Let's also say that this other printer is one you respect because he/she charges what you consider to be reasonable, profit-supporting prices.

I hope you'll understand that it's a completely different story if they're buying from a printer whose only semblance of a marketing plan seems to be low-balling everything!

Stages 4-5

In order to move past Stage 3, you need to have accomplished two things: you have to *know* the name of the decision-maker, and you have to *think* he/she is worth pursuing. It's not necessary to *know* that yet, because you're still in the early stages of the game.

The whole topic of "qualifying" seems to be a mystery to many salespeople, lots of whom try to do this simply on the basis of the size of a company—measured in terms of either sales volume or employee count. From my perspective, a company must meet three criteria in order to be considered fully "qualified." First, they must buy exactly the kind of printing/copying you want to sell. Second, they must buy enough of it to make them worth the salesperson's time. And third, they must show some interest in buying it from you. As I tell my sales coaching clients, a suspect who won't even agree to an appointment with you is *not* a qualified prospect, at least not yet!

That first face-to-face appointment represents Stage 5 of the selling game. It's important to understand, though, that you will very rarely go from identifying the decision-maker at Stage 3 directly to the appointment stage. The pre-appointment stage—Stage 4—presents several specific challenges of its own!

First is the challenge of connecting with the decision-maker on the telephone, a necessary first step toward securing an appointment, and one complicated in modern times by the typical decision-maker's own workload. Next comes the challenge of convincing the decision-maker to agree to an appointment. The first of these challenges is further complicated by the ubiquitous use of voice mail, and the second reflects the fact that just about everyone involved in the purchase of quick/digital/small commercial printing has other things on his/her mind. It's important to understand that printing is just another thing that most of these people have to deal with, and all things being equal, simply staying with the printer they've been using represents the path of least resistance and the least strain on their already busy lives.

Fortunately, there are things a salesperson can do to differentiate himself/herself from other printers. I'll write more about that, too, in a future column on playing and winning the selling game.

Stuck At Stage 4

If you can't secure an appointment, you are stuck at Stage 4, and that requires a conscious decision on how to proceed. There are really only two possibilities, one of which is to keep trying to get that appointment, and the other is to remove this particular "suspect" from your list. It should be obvious that any suspect who won't agree to see you doesn't "qualify" in terms of my third qualifying criteria: he/she has to show some interest in buying from you.

Unfortunately, this is another of those "should-be-but-usually-isn't" situations, and I've observed that far too many printing salespeople spend far too much of their time barking up the wrong trees. They list people like this as prospects, and get comfortable in the fact that they have a good "prospect" in the pipeline. All too often, they're only kidding themselves—and their employers. (By the way, please note the use of the dog analogy. I have learned a few things from Bob Hall over the years!)

Stages 6-7...and Beyond

Once you do get—and complete—that first appointment, you have arrived at Stage 6. The big question here for most salespeople is "what do I do next?" The answer depends to a large degree on what you did and said during that first face-to-face opportunity. If you did nothing other than make a presentation—showing samples and describing your capabilities—you may well have shot off all of your big sales and marketing guns. If that's the case, all you'll have left is to call from time to time and ask "do you have anything for me to quote on today?" As I've written before, that's not really selling!

If you've taken a more consultative approach to the first face-to-face appointment, and used it to gather information rather than present it, you can arrange things so that you're well positioned to come back for a second face-to-face visit to tell your now better-qualified prospect how you think you can meet his/her needs. I always recommend a strategy by which you reserve the first appointment for asking questions of and about the suspect, with two specific goals in mind. First, you want to determine whether this suspect really is a prospect, according to the three criteria listed earlier. Second, you hope to identify some real opportunity, a need that matches your capabilities and isn't being well served by the printer(s)-in-place.

If you find an opportunity like that, you may be able to go from Stage 6 to Stage 7 and then directly to what I think we should call Stage C1—the first stage of an actual printer/customer relationship. Stage 7 is a serious quote opportunity, based on a mutual understanding of a qualified prospect's needs and your capabilities, and Stage C1 is the first order that results. Let's not kid ourselves, though, a Stage C1 customer is not yet a solid customer whom you can count on for more business. In fact, it would be far better to think of this person as a prospect who's giving you a chance. If that first job goes well, you can upgrade his/her status to Stage C2, a customer from whom you can probably expect more business. The highest and most desirable stage of customer development—Stage C3—is when a customer relationship matures into what I referred to earlier as a "buying habit."

Stuck At Stages 6-7

It's pretty common for a salesperson to get stuck at Stage 6 or Stage 7, after one or more appointments that went pretty well, and maybe even a serious quote or two. Even though there haven't been any orders yet, it seems like there will be opportunity, it's just that the timing is not yet right.

Whenever I faced this situation as a salesperson, I asked my prospect to help me to establish an ongoing strategy. "I feel like we're making progress here," I would say, "but I recognize that the time isn't right yet for you to be giving me an order. I also know that there can be a fine line between staying in touch and becoming a pain in your butt! So please tell me what I should do to keep this ball rolling. How often should I be calling on you? Should I be calling on the phone? Coming by in person? Sending you faxes or e-mails?"

My experience is that serious prospects will cooperate with your selling efforts, and I've had more than a few prospects who stayed at Stage 6 or Stage 7 for what seemed like a long time before they finally "graduated" to Stage C1. Unfortunately, experience has also shown that there are less-than-serious prospects who will "string you along" without ever buying anything. Interestingly, some of those people are only "stringing you along" because they don't want to hurt your feelings by telling you that it's unlikely that they'll ever give you any business.

It's important for a salesperson to know the difference, and whenever I had any doubt as to which situation I was looking at, I asked my "prospect" a slightly different question. "I feel like we're making progress here," I would say. "Do you agree? Do you feel like it's just a matter of time before we start doing business together? If not—if I'm kidding myself about the progress I think I've been making—I hope you'll tell me that now instead of letting me waste a lot of both of our time. If it's bad news, I can take it. Please don't worry about hurting my feelings!"

There were times, of course, when the answer was: "Well, since you put it that way..." Still, I've maintained for a long time that a salesperson is better off knowing exactly where he/she stands, good news or bad.

Closing Thoughts

The selling game has rules and procedures, and playing it well involves intelligent strategy and technique. I hope it will help you to understand the "stages of the game" a little bit better, and to understand that you should approach each stage with specific objectives in mind, and a plan to achieve those objectives.

The best "sales athletes" understand the game they play, just like the best players in other sports and games rely on an understanding of the game as well as their athletic skills. Ted Williams spent a lot of time thinking about hitting a baseball, and Mark McGuire and Ken Griffey, Jr. treat their individual challenges the same way. Larry Bird, Michael Jordan, Chris Evert, Martina Navritolova, Tiger Woods...the list of skilled athletes who raised their games to another level through a deeper understanding of how to apply their physical skills should serve as a constant reminder to quick/digital/small commercial printing salespeople that there's a lot more to the selling game than asking people if they have anything you can quote on today!