

The Best Printer In Town

Some months back, I was walking down one of the aisles of exhibits at the Gutenberg Festival, the annual printing industry trade show in Southern California. I found myself listening in on the conversation of two women—two quick printers—who were walking just in front of me.

One of these women was saying to the other that her goal for this year was to establish her company as “the best printer in town.”

That got me thinking. My first thought was that this printer had set a very worthy goal. You shouldn't be in this business—any business, really—unless you're willing to commit yourself to excellence. My next thought, though, was to wonder how she'll know if she's attained her goal.

Reasonable And Measurable

See, there are two things I know about the art and science of goalsetting. One is that your goals have to be reasonable. Otherwise they won't serve to motivate you, and that's really the reason that people and businesses should have goals in the first place. If you make your goals too easy to achieve, you might reach every single one of them, but will you have gone as far as you absolutely could have with a little bit more challenge and motivation?

On the other side of the coin, if you make your goals too hard to achieve, you'll never reach them. The most demotivating thing I know of is when you find yourself 80% of the way through the time period allowed to reach some goal, and you're only 20% of the way there. The realization that your chances of achieving that goal are down to “slim and none” is not likely to motivate you. It's not likely to get you up and out at the crack of dawn to put in a 110% effort that day.

The *reasonable* part of setting goals is what keeps you challenged...or keeps you from becoming depressed and suicidal! The *measurable* part simply gives you a means to keep your score. Goals with numbers attached to them are very good for keeping measure, like *total sales of \$100,000 more than last year, 5 new customers each month, 20 cold calls each week, with mail and telephone follow-up leading to 5 productive appointments.*

Goals without numbers attached—like becoming the best printer in town—are much harder to measure. In fact, this particular goal may be impossible to quantify. But seeking to be the best at anything is a worthy target, and I found myself thinking that we should at least have some idea of what it might take to be the best printer in any town.

An Informal Survey

So I got on the telephone and called a bunch of printers around the country. I described the comment I'd heard, and asked each printer what he or she thought would be the criteria for determining the best printer in town. The responses were interesting.

Michelle Mathieu of Precise Printing in Warrenville, IL told me that she'd define the best printer in terms of “top quality work in a reasonable amount of time, with personal attention.” Of those three elements, she believes that personal attention is the one most likely to make one printer stand out. And that's a focus of Precise Printing. “Our motto,” she told me, “is ‘printing with a personal touch.’”

Mike Spears runs The Printing Center in Sioux Falls, SD, and he expressed similar thoughts. “Service and quality...that's what people want,” he said. “But when you break down what service is, I think the factor that could really separate one printer from another is the way you handle the client.” Mike feels that The Printing Center stands out with sort of a down-home flavor. “We try to treat all our clients like friends,” he said.

Victor Lau of Kion Printing in South El Monte, CA, is both a printer and a supplier to quick printers. (Kion is a brokerage source for short-run 4/C process printing.) “I think the key is consistency,” he said. “Most printers can do good work. To be the best you have to be very good all the time.”

Jerry Davis is the manager of the printing company I use for my own work, Sir Speedy Printing in Cary, NC. He sees “the best printer in town” as a moving target. “It's all in how well you can meet what each individual customer is looking for,” he said, “and you can't be all things to all people. We tend to gear ourselves toward the people and companies who require the highest level of service, to make ourselves the best printer for them.”

The Buyer's Viewpoint

In all, I spoke with nearly a dozen printers, and their answers were largely consistent. But I recognize—and I hope you will too—that it's not what *we* think that's really important. It's what *they* think...the people who buy from you!

So to get that viewpoint, I pulled out a collection of business cards I've picked up for various reasons in my travels, and called some people who buy printing as part of their jobs.

Roger Coyle runs airplane brokerage and flying service in Scottsdale, AZ. "Service would be the biggest consideration," he said. He named a local quick printer, and told me that the reason he brings his business there is that "they give me exceptionally good service."

Barbara Kassanchuk is an office manager in Minneapolis, MN. "The printer I'm using now is the best one I've ever had," she said. "because they *listen* and follow our special instructions." She's had plenty of experience with printers who would get the job *almost* right. "but somebody would always forget to read something, remember a detail, or think."

Deb Hickok manages a county tourist commission in Southeastern Pennsylvania, and her printing requirements range from small quantities of simple work to long runs of high-color mailers, catalogs, and brochures. "For us," she said, "it wouldn't be so much a matter of the best printer in town as the best printer for a particular job. And each case involves some combination of quality, service, and also price. But if there's one standard I apply to any category of printer and project, it's that I want to deal with people who will appreciate our business."

Carol Bilodeau is a full-time printing buyer for a large software distributing company in Canton, MA. "The things that most of the printing salespeople I see talk about are quality, service, and price," she said. "But what really makes a printer stand out in my opinion is knowledge, and the willingness to share it to help *us* do things better."

Focus On Knowledge

That element of applying and sharing knowledge came up in a number of conversations with printing buyers, and I think it's significant that *none* of the printers I talked to mentioned it. I found a large degree of consensus on the elements of quality—both in product and service—consistency, and special, caring treatment of clients. But I think it's obvious that there's a gap in the perception of what it really would take to be the best printer in town.

And what I think is most interesting is this: the buyers who focused on the element of applying and sharing knowledge tended to be the ones who had the greatest amount of printing to buy. In other words, the ones you'd most like to have as your customers! The bottom line? It seems that the more they have to buy, the more important it becomes that you help them find better ways to do things.

I've actually incorporated one particular buyer's comments into my *PRINTSELLING* Seminar, because she told me quite clearly that she's learned two things as absolutes in her 15+ years of buying printing. One, she says, is that there's always a lower price. If you're not satisfied with the prices you've got, just keep calling more printers. The other thing she told me she's learned is that there's always a better way to do every job.

That might be in the functional design of a piece. If it were designed differently, it might be made less expensive to produce, saving the buyer money. Or it might be in the artistic design, or even the writing. By making it more visually appealing—or more easily understandable—the printed piece might perform better. That might mean a flyer or brochure that *sells more stuff* for the client company, giving them much greater value for the money they spent to produce it.

Where does price fit in terms of the best printer in town? Most of the printers and several of the buyers mentioned price as one of the criteria they use in choosing which printer to deal with. But when I pressed them on the issue of *the best printer*, they all agreed that the best printer in town was unlikely to be the lowest priced one. In fact, all agreed that the best printer in town should charge more—and get it!

The Bottom Line

Should you make it your goal to become the best printer in your town? It's certainly a worthy goal to strive for. But the bottom line is that you don't have to be *the absolute best* to be very, very successful. The lesson I hope you'll find here is that there's something most printers are missing in their understanding of what would make them the best printer in town.

It's that element of applying and sharing knowledge, and I hope you'll go looking for opportunities to add it to your sales strategy. Don't be satisfied just to quote on the specs you're given, especially if it's a competitive situation. Look for ways to apply and share your expertise to make the printed piece perform better for the client. In that situation, it's not necessary to be the best printer in town...only the best among those being considered for the particular job. I'd be real happy to have that happen one or two—or ten—times every day!