

The Good and the Great

I've always said that there's not a lot of visible difference between the good printers and the great printers. The great printers don't have any better equipment, any more sales skill, or any greater technical talent. What they usually do have is a better understanding of the subtleties of the market. That's the first thought for today.

Voice Mail Blues

One of the questions I'm most frequently asked in my *PRINTSELLING* seminar these days is what to do about voice mail. As these voice mail systems become more prevalent, it's obvious that they're becoming a huge source of frustration for printing salespeople.

One veteran salesperson told me recently that the voice mail problem is similar to the age-old problem of getting through to prospects who don't return your phone calls, but with one important difference.

"Many times," he said, "I could build some sort of rapport with the secretary or receptionist who answered the phone as I kept on calling and trying. Not every time, but sometimes, I felt like that secretary finally got the guy to call me back."

With voice mail replacing that human being, the opportunity to gain an ally in the "enemy" camp is taken away from you...or is it? Many of the voice mail systems I find myself connected to have a provision for getting through to a live operator.

My normal practice is to leave a voice mail message that explains my purpose in calling. (That's one of the good things about voice mail, by the way, the opportunity to leave a detailed message instead of just your name and company name.) If I don't get a return call within a day or so, I'll call again and leave a second voice mail message, but that's the last time I'll talk to the tape machine.

On my third call, I'll take the option for a live operator, and see what kind of help I might be able to get from the secretary or receptionist. I usually learn a lot from these conversations.

Unfortunately, I sometimes learn that there's not likely to be any business in this place for me. But then again, isn't that what prospecting and qualifying are about?

Turn Around

Don't disregard the value of the written word in this situation. When you can't get through on the phone, try a letter or fax. (The veteran salesperson I mentioned earlier speaks fondly of the results he used to get from sending telegrams in this situation.)

I really think that on balance, voice mail does more good for printing salespeople than it does harm. You can work around the problems in many cases, and I love what voice mail does for your ability to manage live projects with existing customers. In the past, you often had to leave a message for a call-back because the things you might have needed to ask or tell the client were too complicated to trust to the process of a secretary or receptionist taking a message. With voice mail, you eliminate that middle-person and leave a detailed message, and it can actually speed up the process of getting information back and forth.

Telephone Technique

I'm semi-famous for throwing out blanket statements in my seminars and asking the audience if they agree or disagree. Here's one for you to think about...*the only thing a printer can sell on the telephone is an appointment!*

If you agree with this statement, you have to ask yourself if your prospecting/qualifying/appointment getting technique is consistent with what you've just decided you believe. How much time do you spend on these phone calls describing your printing specialties or capabilities? I view those things as attempts to sell your company, and you can't do that anywhere nearly as well on the phone as you can in a face-to-face presentation.

The purpose of the phone call should be strictly and only to get the appointment. Now, there is a complicating factor in that people aren't necessarily going to agree to an appointment without some idea of what kind of work you do, and why it will be time well spent. What's the answer? I say it's to precede the call that asks for an appointment by putting some basic information about your company in the buyer's hand.

Don't send your whole marketing package, that's not what I'm saying. What you really need here is something that will generate interest in hearing the rest of what you have to say. A letter, a flyer, or a simple brochure is what's called for. The you call on the telephone with a better chance of closing the first part of any ultimate sale...getting the appointment!

Junk Mail? Who Says!

Here's a "simplified" vision of a distribution path for all kinds of products and services. At the beginning of the path are the *marketers* who have something to sell. At the path's end are the *consumers* who will (hopefully) buy. In the middle are the *printers* who create the vehicles that have to do the actual selling. What we're talking about here is *direct mail*, which you know as well as I do is often called by another name...*junk mail*.

I get a little angry when I hear printers use that term. The marketers never use it, at least the quality marketers don't. And I've noticed that the printers who have made themselves most successful as suppliers to these marketers don't use it either. I'm not sure that it's critical that you respect the design and content of all of the work you do. But from the selling perspective, you'd better show respect for the pathway to the marketplace that your customers and prospects have chosen.

Having said that, I certainly agree that there are some pretty junky direct marketing pieces being printed and mailed these days. The term junk mail, though, didn't originate through any reference to print quality, or to the design or content of the mailers. The origins of the term really refer to the fact that the earliest mass mail programs came addressed to the "occupant" of every home or business in an area. There was no targeting of prospects beyond the blanketing of a piece of geography.

The entire direct marketing discipline, of which direct mail is really only just a part, has become a lot more sophisticated. More than anything else, it's the power of computers that has given marketers the ability to target the people who they want to receive their offer. And when you look at some of the cost factors involved in taking this pathway to the market, you'll understand why targeting is so important.

Direct mail "packages" have had to blaze new trails in visual stimulation. There is so much mail being sent out and received, and the bottom line is that one mailing is in competition with every other mailing for a limited attention span among the consumers it's trying to reach. What that translates to is more color, more attached cards or labels or other involvement devices, more expensive production techniques...more expense period! The big direct mailers have been battered by increases in paper cost over the last few years too, and then there's the factor that probably frustrates them the most, increases in postal rates.

This need to target more effectively is actually working against printers. Direct marketers don't want to mail to anyone who isn't a likely prospect for their product or service. They're more willing to spend money on the front end to be sure that their mailing lists are "optimized" (read that as small as possible while still covering all of the likely prospects), so the quantities being printed and mailed on any individual program are probably going down. The sophistication of some of these targeting programs might amaze you. Not too many years ago, a marketer with a product that appealed to sports fans might rent the mailing list from one of the big national sports magazines and send their offer to all of its subscribers. If the product would only appeal to people at a relatively high income range, though, many of those mailing pieces would probably be wasted. Now, mailers can take advantage of dramatic improvements in what is called database marketing. The list owners survey their customers and subscribers, and cross-reference with a variety of other available databases to create a much more comprehensive profile of each individual "name." As a marketer, you could now mail to only the part of the magazine's mailing list that fits your income criteria. You can segment even further. I know of a company that sends its mailings out to only the mid to high income subscribers of a sports magazine who live within a defined distance of a city with an NFL team.

The quantities in individual mailing programs may be going down, but the number of companies employing direct mail is continuing to go up. And so is the frequency of their mailings as many newcomers to the discipline begin to realize that it's really true that consistency and repetition are among the keys to success in this form of marketing. (Are you listening, printers who send out a mailing once every year or so and wonder why direct mail doesn't seem to be working?)

This is a market that every printer knows exists. I hope that knowing a little more about it might help you get more business out of it. I'll write more about direct mail—including much smaller, local "business-to-business" direct mail programs—in future issues.