

The Great Equalizer

In the world of sports—especially contact sports like football, basketball and the martial arts—it's generally accepted that a good big person will beat a good smaller person every time. In any situation where the talent of competitors is equal, greater size almost always provides the winning advantage.

In the graphic arts marketplace, size can also provide a competitive advantage, but the bigger printing company doesn't always win. The great equalizer in any printing competition is *quality*, and that's true whether you're talking about printing awards competitions like PrintImage International's Print Excellence Awards or the more local printing competitions sponsored by PIA Affiliates and Craftsman's Clubs—or the competition for orders that goes on in every printing market every day.

Attention To Detail

Quality printing is not a function of the size of a printing company. More than anything else, quality in printing is a function of *attention to detail*.

Small companies are just as capable of that as larger ones. In fact, it may actually be easier for a smaller company to focus on quality. With fewer people involved in any project—and probably with fewer projects running through the shop on any given day—there can also be far fewer opportunities for quality failures to “slip through the cracks.”

Selling Quality

The truth in the marketplace is that most printing companies do a good enough job in terms of quality. Customers are satisfied with what they're getting far more often than not. However, most printing companies don't do a very good job of *selling* quality, and that can be a critical issue in the situation where “talent”—the ability to produce quality printing—is substantially equal. Large or small, a company perceived to be a top-quality printer will get an expanded share of its market.

So how do you create that perception? Most printing salespeople seem to be limited to a “show and tell” approach...showing samples and telling prospects that those samples represent an understanding of—and a commitment to—quality. *“We know how important quality is to you, and we'll make sure you get it.”*

There are several flaws in that approach, and one is that quality means something different to just about every printing buyer! In the absence of a universal definition of quality, a salesperson sits at the mercy of each individual prospect's interpretation. Another problem with this approach is simply that it's so commonly used. How does a prospect differentiate between printing companies when all of the printing salespeople say essentially the same thing?

Standing Out In The Crowd

The printing industry can take many lessons from the industries it services. Consider that a large percentage of the work handled by most quick/digital/small commercial printing companies falls into the category of “promotional” printing. The purpose of this promotional printing is to sell—or to support the sale of—the client company's products and/or services.

What makes promotional printing successful? To some degree it's appearance, since the first “selling challenge” a piece of promotional printing faces is to get read! Obviously, that's where printing quality comes in. But to a larger degree, promotional printing succeeds on its ability to differentiate one company's products and/or services from its competitors. The dual requirement for success of a promotional printed piece is to capture the prospect's attention and then communicate at least one compelling reason why the prospect should buy what the company is trying to sell!

To look at that another way, the brochures, catalogs, mailers and other promotional print jobs a printer competes for have to be both “attractive” and “convincing.” Since printers are only held responsible for the “attractive” part, that may explain why so few quick/digital/small commercial printing companies have developed a “convincing” approach to marketing their own products and services.

Facts And Opinions

When a salesperson is faced with a “convincing” challenge, he/she has two persuasive “tools” available: facts and opinions. However, when this convincing challenge hinges on quality, the *facts* tend to be few and far between. Because there is no universal definition of quality, the true meaning of quality printing is a matter of opinion!

OK, then, whose opinion will count for more: the printing salesperson (*I think we produce the best quality printing in this area*); or a testimonial from a current customer? (*I think they produce the best quality printing in this area.*)

There is no question that a testimonial from a current customer will carry more weight than a salesperson's opinion in this circumstance, and as I've written before, there is definitely an opportunity here to take the conversation beyond promises of quality, and into the realm of quality control. But what if there were an opportunity to present an even more powerful opinion? What if you could point to a testimonial from a large body of printing industry experts, one stating that *we think your company produces the best quality printing in this area*?

The combination of a salesperson's confident opinion, the "risk-management" confidence provided by a solid quality control program, supporting testimonials from current customers, and the "fact" of a printing industry award or two can be a very compelling argument that your company *does* have an understanding of—and a commitment to—quality that will satisfy any prospect.

"Award Power"

One of my consulting/Sales Coaching clients—Print Tech of Pittsburgh, PA—won Best of Show honors along with three individual category awards in PrintImage International's first annual Print Excellence Awards competition last year. In a recent conversation with Howard Finger, the Print Tech salesperson I coach, I asked him how he uses that "fact" in his selling efforts. Howard told me about a current situation with one of his prospects, a division of US Steel where the divisional offices are moving, and Howard's challenge is to convince an already overworked and overstressed office manager that Print Tech can handle all of the new stationery and business cards she'll be needing just as well as the printer they've been doing business with for several years.

"I think she likes me," Howard said, "in fact, I think I've built a relationship to the point where she really wants to give me a chance, but she's not sure that she can afford to give me a chance on this particular project. Because of the move, this is going to be a very visible project, and any quality or delivery problems are really going to make her look bad."

Howard's strategy was to prepare a package containing copies of Print Tech's Print Excellence Award certificates (one of which was for Stationery – 1 or 2 colors, exactly the "product" the prospect was concerned with) and hand-deliver it to his prospect. In addition to these "quality" awards, Howard also included a copy of a Supplier of the Year award Print Tech received from one of the best known manufacturing companies in the Pittsburgh area.

Did he get the order? Unfortunately, I had to submit my column for this month before Howard got "the word" from his prospect, but I can't help but think that his strategy is going to pay dividends—if not on this order, then certainly somewhere down the line. You can also bet that Howard and I will talk again about leveraging the "award power" that Print Tech owns.

Missed Opportunity?

Did you enter samples of your best work in any of last year's printing quality competitions? If you didn't, I think you missed a great opportunity to develop some "award power" of your own. If you're a PIA or Craftsman's Club member, be sure to contact your local group and find out about any awards competitions they run. I know that some of the franchises run printing quality competitions as well. And if you're a PrintImage International member, be sure to enter this year's Print Excellence Award competition. For more information, you can contact Jenny Eiriksson at PI Headquarters.

Remember, everyone has an "opinion" about quality, but not every printing salesperson can present his/her company's quality as a "fact."