

## The Printing Sales Knowledge Base

What does it take to be an effective printing salesperson? Many people talk about a “sales personality,” but I’ve found that the most critical elements of success in printing sales are *knowledge-based*. The most outgoing and enthusiastic salesperson in the world will have trouble selling printing if he/she doesn’t rate highly in what I think of as the *Printing Sales Knowledge Base*.

### Product Knowledge

The Printing Sales Knowledge Base has four components, the first of which is product knowledge. A printing salesperson’s product knowledge requirement is substantial, much more substantial, in fact, than salespeople in many other industries face. A printing salesperson has to have some knowledge of how the ink or toner gets on the paper; of the paper itself; of prepress and bindery; of handling digital files; and of the capabilities and limitations of the equipment that your company uses to do all of this.

And even that doesn’t fully cover it. The best printing salespeople are also capable of addressing the *purpose* of the printed piece, and helping clients to create printing that will actually perform to it’s purpose better. Graphics and design skills, copywriting skills, and basic marketing expertise fall into the *product knowledge* category in the Printing Sales Knowledge Base.

### Market Knowledge

The second component is market knowledge, which refers to the things a printing salesperson should know about market itself; about the printer’s typical customer—and your specific customers—and about trends in the printing marketplace.

The increased use of color in business printing and the trend toward buying smaller quantities more frequently are examples of market knowledge.

### Operational Knowledge

The third component is *operational knowledge*, which simply refers to the way you want your printing company to run. How is an order entered? What is a “normal” delivery? Who does the pricing, and how much latitude, if any, does the salesperson have in adjusting those prices? How do you want your salesperson to dress when out on sales calls? What are the parameters for taking prospects or customers out to lunch. Who’s responsible for picking up artwork, or getting proofs back into the shop, or making rush deliveries?

In my experience, this sort of *operational knowledge* is the component that gets the least attention in training salespeople. The result can be that the salesperson is never fully integrated into the organization, never made part of the team. What you get then is usually friction between the salesperson and everyone else.

### Selling Technique

The fourth and final component of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base is selling technique...how to prospect, qualify, and then convince the right kind of people to become your customers. This is the one that’s given the most importance in most printing companies’ thoughts on training. I hope you’ll see that it’s only a part of the overall training challenge.

Here’s something else I hope you’ll see. Three of these components are very definitely *intelligence factors* rather than *personality factors*. The three I’m specifically talking about are product knowledge, market knowledge, and operational knowledge. But I think you can also make a strong case for selling technique being as much an intelligence factor as any factor of personality. I have always believed that salespeople are made—trained—and not born. I’ve always looked for bright people to hire as salespeople, and I’ve always considered a “sales personality” as a plus, but never as a requirement.

### Importance

An understanding of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base will give you a broader means to evaluate your current salespeople. If they’re not doing as well as you want them to, the problem could be in any one of these four components. When you know what’s really lacking, it should be easier to take effective corrective action.

The Printing Sales Knowledge Base may also may point you toward a hiring alternative you haven't adequately considered: moving a current "inside" employee into outside sales. All of the people you have working for you now have at least some measure of product knowledge, market knowledge, and operational knowledge in their own current knowledge base. That includes everyone from "customer service" employees to production people. It may be that all they need to become effective salespeople is some training in selling technique.

Not everyone wants to be a salesperson. That's a fact, and you may still have to look outside. But don't discount the sales potential in your inside employees. One or more of them may have a healthy head start on the Printing Sales Knowledge Base.