

The Selling Game: Playing To Win

Selling is a game. That's one of the things I stress to all of the salespeople I coach and teach in seminars. It's a game with rules, a game which requires certain skills, and just as importantly, it's a game with an incredible amount of history. Sure, there are new wrinkles being added all the time to the way the selling game is played, especially as technology has changed the way people who sell things and people who buy things communicate with each other. But the essential skills required haven't changed much, and there are also tried-and-true strategies and techniques that work just as well today as they did in the "old days."

In fact, Rule One of the selling game hasn't changed even one tiny bit since the very beginning of commerce between human beings

Rule One

Rule One of the selling game is pretty straightforward: All win-win buying/selling relationships are based on trust. The buyer trusts the seller to deliver what was promised, which in the printing industry usually boils down to some combination of quality and service which ultimately adds up to *value*. The seller trusts the buyer to keep his/her side of the bargain, which in our industry starts with the buyer providing everything necessary to facilitate completion of the job—clear instructions/specifications and input materials which are adequate to produce the desired quality and service result—and ends with the buyer paying the bill within the seller's terms.

I've had printers and salespeople tell me that this rule might apply in the "perfect world," but it doesn't seem to be operating in the world they live and work in. I hear lots of stories about prospects and customers who are only interested in price, and customers who never keep their side of the rest of the bargain.

For what it's worth, I also hear plenty of stories from printing buyers about printers and printing salespeople who aren't living up to their side of the deal.

I won't argue that there aren't "customers-from-hell" out there, or "printers-from-hell" either for that matter. But I will refer you back to Rule One of the selling game, which clearly mentions "win-win" buying/selling relationships. If that's not your objective—or if you're letting yourself be satisfied with anything less than true win-win relationships—then you're not really playing the same selling game that I'm writing about.

By the way, I've always found that the customer-to-printer side of win-win relationships is largely self-policing. What I mean by that is if the customer doesn't feel good about the relationship, he/she usually ends it, and finds another printer. On the printer-to-customer side, that doesn't seem to happen nearly as often. Far too many printers spend far too much of their time and other resources in relationships where only the customer really wins.

Please, ask yourself if you are mired in relationships like that, and if you are, please do something about it. You have three strategic choices, one of which is to simply fire the customer. Your other choices are to attempt to improve the relationship, by either educating the customer—telling him/her why the relationship isn't really working for you, and asking him/her to make changes in behavior—or by using what I refer to as the "parking meter" approach.

That approach involves raising the prices you charge a problem customer to whatever point would provide you with a "win" too, fairly compensating you for the time, energy, and aggravation involved in dealing with that customer. I call it the "parking meter" approach because by my definition, anyone who puts enough money in the parking meter is allowed to stay!

Rules Define Strategy

For the intelligent player, the rules of the game define the core strategy you use when playing it. Since Rule One says that all "win-win" relationships are based on trust—and since you only want "win-win" relationships with your customers!—your focus in playing the selling game has to be on building and maintaining trust. As I tell seminar attendees, once you make trust happen, all kinds of good things will happen for you, because at the point where you develop a sufficient level of trust, you have developed a customer!

It might help you to visualize a thermometer, one of the "old-technology" kind, where red or blue tinted mercury climbs up a marked tube as the temperature increases. At some point on the scale is the point where enough trust has been developed to solidify the relationship. Now, as long as you keep the "temperature" at or above that point, the relationship will continue. Let it fall below that point, though, and the relationship is in jeopardy.

It's always been interesting to me that many printers think a quality or service problem will end a customer relationship. The truth of the matter is that that's not precisely what happens. What really happens is that a quality or service failure reduces the "trust temperature," and that's what threatens the relationship.

Some of you “older folks” might remember that, during the height of the Cold War, certain people in government and the media made references to the “Armageddon Clock,” a notional frame-of-reference to how close the world was to nuclear war at any given time. During the Cuban Missile Crisis in the early 60’s, for example, it was felt that we were only a couple of minutes from “midnight” on that clock, which would signify the start of a nuclear conflict. I’m not suggesting that you start keeping an “Armageddon Clock,” but I do think it would be a good idea to keep tabs on the “trust temperature” with your most important customers.

How do you do that? On the theory that a picture is worth a thousand words, I could see you designing a thermometer poster which could be produced on your laser printer, or even on a connected color copier. Hang one poster for each important customer in some prominent place in your shop, and keep the temperature reading up to date, so that every employee knows where you stand—and where you have to stand!—with each important customer.

How do you know the exact temperature? Here’s an important piece of advice. Ask the customer! Never assume that things are going well because you haven’t heard anything to indicate otherwise! It’s an accepted fact that many customers don’t tell you when they’re unhappy with you. They just end the relationship!

I have gone out to my own customers many times over the years and asked them if there was anything—no matter how small!—that they would change about our relationship if they could. As you might imagine, I’ve learned a lot from those conversations, and I will tell you in all honesty that I learned about a few problems that I didn’t know I had!

I always considered it good news, though, to learn about a problem while there was still time to fix it!

Building Trust

How do you build trust in the first place? Many printers and salespeople seem to think that all you have to do is ask people to trust you, and they will. I don’t know about you, but the idea of a salesperson saying “Trust Me!” tends to send shivers up my spine.

In fact, as I wrote a few months ago, whenever I hear those words, my first reaction is to discretely touch my left-hand rear pocket—where I keep my wallet—and my second reaction is to look for an escape route. Let’s face it, we don’t really trust anyone who has something to sell until they show us that we can. Trust must be earned, it is most assuredly not granted automatically!

So how do you build it? The most successful salespeople understand that you build it one small step at a time. As I teach in seminars, the best strategy for building the trust it takes to turn a prospect into a customer is to make promises...and then keep them!

We’re not talking here about the promise of quality or service, or the promise to deliver a job at some particular time. We’re talking about promises that should come much earlier in the customer development process. I teach a prospecting strategy that starts with a “cold call” for the purpose of gaining information (from a “gatekeeper,” not from a decision-maker!) I recommend leaving a note for the decision-maker on that cold call, though, a note which makes a promise to send information through the mail. Then I recommend sending a letter which does, in fact, keep that promise.

The letter contains another promise, to call on the phone and ask for an appointment. Securing that appointment provides the opportunity for still another promise, to be at a specific place on a specific date at a specific time.

Ultimately, a salesperson will have to make what I think of as “The Big Promise”—if you give me your business, I’ll take care of everything and you’ll be happy. Smart salespeople understand that you’ll have a better chance of someone believing that promise if it’s not the first one out of your mouth. It’s much better selling game strategy to precede that “Big Promise” with a few smaller promises made and then kept.

Here’s an analogy that may be helpful. I suspect it won’t be hard for you to accept the idea of placing your customers on a pedestal. Consider, though, what is that pedestal made of? In my mind’s eye, it’s a brick pedestal, and the bricks represent the necessary level of trust. It’s a level of trust that was built one brick at a time!