

Three Things To Look For In A Salesperson

I get asked pretty often about what specific characteristics to look for in a quick/digital/small commercial printing salesperson. My answer always includes three things: intelligence, a competitive nature and an appreciation for the finer things in life. And if push comes to shove, I can live without Number 3, at least in the beginning, because I know that I can teach someone with the first two characteristics to develop the third.

Intelligence

Intelligence is simply the single most important factor in complete selling success. Please note the word “complete,” because I recognize that there are printing salespeople out there putting up pretty good numbers without displaying much brain-power. It’s been my experience that these people are the exception, though, and not the rule. It’s also been my experience that these salespeople are usually the ones who have to be “tolerated” by owners and fellow employees. Yeah, they bring in business, but they also cause problems. Given the choice, I’m sure you’d prefer to hire someone who can bring in business and be a fully-functional part of the team. That, I believe, is very largely a function of intelligence.

I have written before about the Printing Sales Knowledge Base: Product Knowledge, Market Knowledge, Operational Knowledge and Selling Strategy and Technique. Those are the things a printing salesperson has to develop in order to be successful.

I have also written before about the purely economic limitations that most quick/digital/small commercial printers face in hiring a salesperson. When all you’re willing and/or able to invest in a salesperson reflects an amount in the lower ranges of the compensation spectrum, that limits you to hiring someone to whom that will be enough money. That basically describes two types of people, those who are satisfied with earnings in that range (which in selling usually translates to being an underachiever) or those who want to earn a whole lot more, but don’t have enough experience yet to command a higher wage.

When you consider the Printing Sales Knowledge Base and the economic factors together, doesn’t it seem like your best move is to hire a young person who’s smart enough to learn all of what he/she has to know to be successful? In my sales coaching, I’m working with a number of people who fit that description, and almost without exception, these are salespeople who are on their way to complete success.

Competitive Nature

You have to want to win to be a successful salesperson. You also have to know who you’re competing against. The latter is a function of intelligence. The former is simply the second most important factor in complete selling success. I don’t know any really successful salespeople who don’t have a competitive nature.

That’s not to say that you have to be an ultra-jock to be successful as a salesperson. You just have to understand that you’ll be in competition every day, and you have to relish the competition.

Cliff Shellhase is one of my sales coaching associates. He’s a retired printing/business forms salesman, and I might once have said that a guy like Cliff has forgotten more about selling than most people ever know...except that I know from personal experience that Cliff hasn’t forgotten anything! He told me once that he loves the coaching, but he sometimes misses “strapping it on” every day to take an active part in the competition. That’s the kind of mindset you have to have to be successful as a salesperson.

So who—or perhaps what—is today’s printing salesperson competing against? It is not another printer, even though your salespeople will often be quoting against other printers in an effort to win orders. And it’s not the prospect or customer either—the idea that you’re in competition with the people you’re trying to sell strikes me as a pretty unhealthy idea. So who—or what—is it? The bottom line is that salespeople are mostly competing against *status quo*.

Think about it. Just about everyone who buys printing is already buying from a printer—often more than one! Even the people in start-up businesses usually have some knowledge of—and often a relationship with—at least one printer from their previous experience. The challenge your salespeople will face with those people is to change their minds!

The good news is that some prospects are already thinking about changing the status quo. They’ve been disappointed by the quality or service they’ve been getting, and they’re ready to let someone else into the competition for their business. That bodes well for your salesperson—except that real-world experience has shown that some of these people go right back to the status quo after a brief flirtation, because what they really want is low

prices, and when push comes to shove, they'll accept a lower level of quality and service at a lower price point than what the better printers are asking for. I have written before about The Selling Game, and that's all part of the game.

Other prospects, though, aren't even aware that they have problems! The challenge with these people is to show them that there's a better way—and that you represent it!

You have to love the competition to be willing to go out into the marketplace to try to change people's minds every day. You also have to be intelligent enough to figure out how to do it, providing solutions to problems they didn't even know they had! So, you need intelligence and a competitive nature.

By the way, all of this covers the need to compete for your current customers' business too. In that case, you're not competing against the status quo, of course, but rather working to defend it. You still have the competitive challenge of changing people's minds, though, because if your current customer wasn't thinking about changing the way you've been doing business together, there was no competitive situation in the first place!

The Finer Things

When you come right down to it, the best motivation for a quick/digital/small commercial printing salesperson is money. Actually, that's not quite correct. The best motivation for any kind of salesperson is what money will buy! I spoke with a printer last week who was attracted to a candidate because he needed to earn more money. I suggested that we hold out for someone who has all the money he/she needs, but simply *wants* more!

Think about this for a minute. What sort of person always needs money. Does the word "underachiever" come to mind? Yes, I know there are good people caught in bad situations, but again, I think we're talking about the exceptions that prove the rule.

My father made a good living as an office products salesman. He also had three sons with a total age difference of five years. When my older brother decided to go to graduate school right after getting his BS in Engineering, my dad had the dubious pleasure of having all three kids in college at the same time. Like I said, he made a good living, and he was able to handle the load, but the thing I most remember about those years was the picture of a Lincoln Mark IV that he cut out of a magazine and taped onto the wall above his desk. He'd been driving an Olds 98, and that whetted his appetite for the next step up the line.

"I can own one of these" he told me back then. "I can certainly own one after you and your brothers graduate from college."

"On the other hand," he said, "I can own one before that if I find a few new customers. And I want you to remember that I was willing to work hard to earn what I wanted."

One of the great memories from my college days was driving that nearly new Mark IV out to Ithaca, NY with my younger brother to pick up my older brother after he finished up his graduate program at Cornell. I think of that whole trip as a gift from my father to his sons, sharing the reward that he earned through his willingness to work, and teaching me a very valuable lesson at the same time.

Your Training Challenge

Let's go back to the Printing Sales Knowledge Base for just a moment: Product Knowledge, Market Knowledge, Operational Knowledge and Selling Strategy and Technique. As noted earlier, those are things a printing salesperson has to have in order to be successful. What you now have to accept is that any of this knowledge that is not present in your candidate—or in your current salesperson—has to be trained in!

The good news is that these things can be learned. The bad news is that the basic intelligence which will accelerate the learning process is either there or it's not. The bottom line here is that your training challenge increases as the native intelligence of the trainee decreases. That's why I rate basic intelligence as the single most important characteristic to look for in a salesperson.

Now, can you teach someone to be competitive? Yes, you can, but experience has shown it to be a long-term challenge. That's why I think it's so important to hire someone who already has a competitive nature.

You can teach someone to appreciate the finer things in life. How do you do that? You *expose* them to the finer things in life, just like my dad—and several of the managers I've worked for over the years—did for me. I have a client who drives a Jaguar, and I have suggested that she take her salespeople riding in it every once in a while. And every time you do, I've told her, make it a point to tell them how they could own one of their own someday.

I spent a day recently with another client whose salesperson just bought a late-model Ford Explorer. I congratulated this young man on his purchase, and during our day together, I made him drive us over to the local Lincoln dealership where we test-drove a top-of-the-line Lincoln Navigator. I think he got the message, because he told me last time we spoke on the phone that he now has a picture of a Navigator taped up above his desk. This is a young man with a goal I think my father would have approved of! He has something that's pretty good, but he also knows that there's something better.

Introducing him to that idea is not enough, though, so I took him one more step. Rather than simply hoping that he'll make enough money to afford a Navigator someday, I helped him to set a three-year series of sales goals that would get him to the point where he could actually afford to buy one. Now he knows what he wants, and he also knows something about what he'll have to do to get it.

A Final Thought

The idea of "good" and "better" came up in another way during my day of sales calls with this young salesperson. He's been running up against the situation where people tell him that they're happy with their current printer, and in fact, we ran right into that statement on our second call that day. I asked the name of the other printer, and then I said "Yes, we can certainly understand why you'd be happy with them. They're very good! But we want to ask you to consider the possibility that we're even better!" That led to a 15 minute conversation during which we identified a couple of things that the other printer wasn't providing.

Lots of people know that they have "good." The trick to dealing with that objection—and competing against the status quo—is to introduce the possibility that you might be "better."